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Touko Shino

7

The Apothecary Diaries

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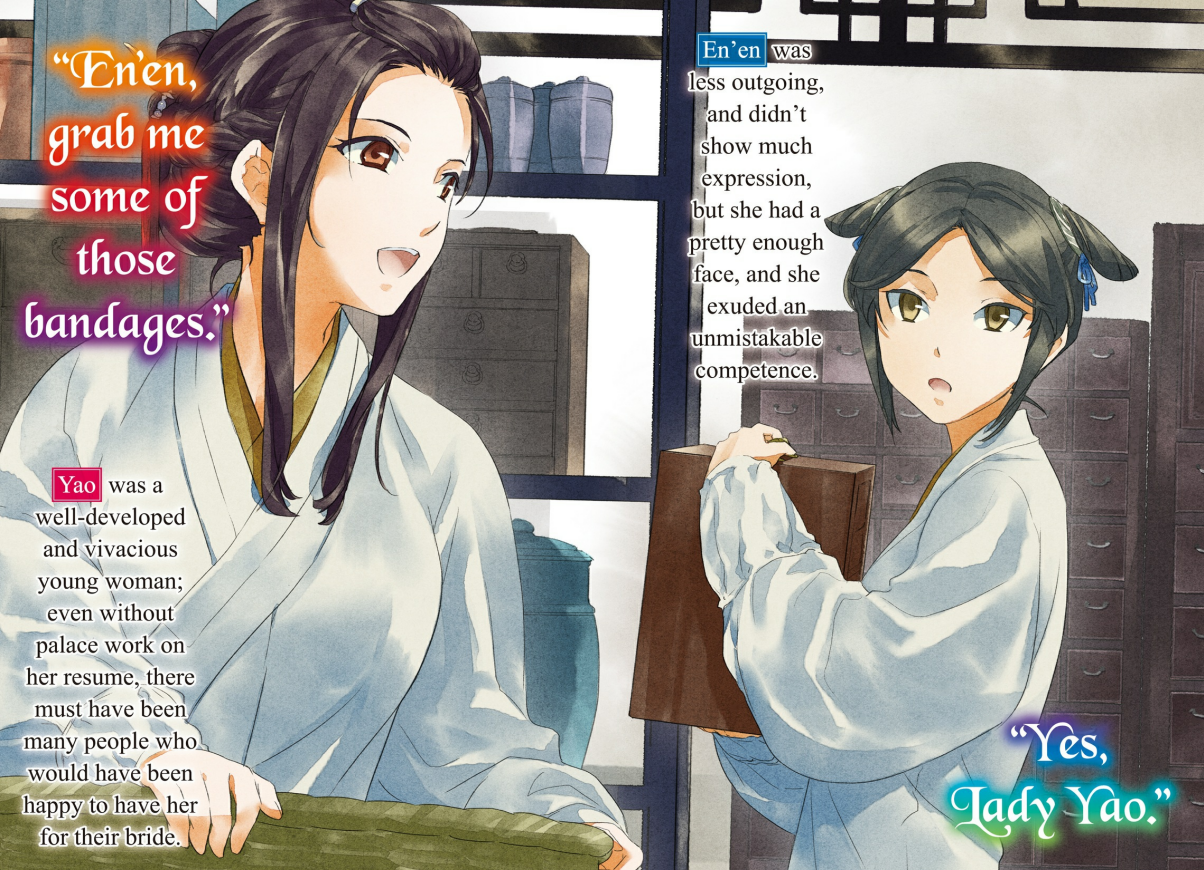
When Maomao had the bandages boiling nicely in a big pot...


"En'en, grab me some of those bandages."
Yao was a well-developed and vivacious young woman; even without palace work on her resume, there must have been many people who would have been happy to have her for their bride.
En'en was less outgoing, and didn't show much expression, but she had a pretty enough face, and she exuded an unmistakable competence.
"Yes, Lady Yao."

Jazgul was practically bouncing up and down with excitement. She was so eager to get on the boat.

Jinshi let the tea ripple in the cup.
"Who put this tea here?"

And somewhere in the middle of it all was a most unsettling shadow, following the group from behind. Maomao tried to ignore it, but she kept seeing it out of the corner of her eye. Maybe the person thought they were being sneaky, but they were terrible at it. Who was this strange figure? He had no facial hair, eyes like a fox, and a pointless monocle (maybe he thought it made him look fashionable). By now you ought to know who we're talking about. One wouldn't wish to say his name.

"Who's *that*?"

Some of the ladies began to whisper.

(He's more important than you might think around here...)

Table of Contents

Cover

Character Profiles

Introduction

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Court Ladies' Service Exam

Chapter 2: Harassment

Chapter 3: Medical Assistant

Chapter 4: The Rear Palace

Chapter 5: Fortune Cookies

Chapter 6: Strategist Down

Chapter 7: Aylin's Intentions

Chapter 8: The Thought Behind the Thought

Chapter 9: Empress

Chapter 10: Covert Ops

Chapter 11: Before the Celebration

Chapter 12: Child of a Foreign Land

Chapter 13: Lady-in-Waiting to His Majesty's Younger Brother

Chapter 14: Meeting the Shrine Maiden

Chapter 15: "Mom"

Chapter 16: The Dinner

Chapter 17: The Suspect

Chapter 18: A Man and a Woman Play the Game

Chapter 19: The Truth Behind the Truth

Chapter 20: Mushroom Congee
Chapter 21: The Shrine Maiden’s Confession
Chapter 22: The Future Shrine Maiden
Epilogue
Color Illustrations
About J-Novel Club
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Character Profiles

Maomao
An apothecary in the pleasure district. Downright obsessed with medicines and poisons, but largely uninterested in other matters. Nineteen years old.

Jinshi
The Emperor's younger brother. Inhumanly beautiful. He can't get Maomao off his mind, but by hook or by crook, she always manages to evade him. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant. Doesn't feel pain as acutely as most people, which gives him far greater physical limits than most have. He's very serious, but that makes him easy to tweak. In love with Consort Lishu.

Gaoshun
Basen's father. A well-built soldier, he was formerly Jinshi's attendant, but now he serves the Emperor personally.

Lakan
Maomao's father and Luomen's nephew. A freak with a monocle. He's a high-ranking member of the military, but his bizarre behavior causes people to avoid him.

Lahan
Lakan's nephew and adopted son. A small man with round glasses, he has a soft spot for beautiful women and will try to chat them up anytime he sees one, never mind that his looks don't match theirs.

Luomen
Maomao's adoptive father; Lakan's uncle. Once a eunuch in the rear palace, he now serves as a court physician. He's missing one kneecap, a punishment inflicted on him many years ago.

Ah-Duo
Formerly one of the Emperor's four favored consorts. A handsome woman who dresses in men's clothing. Thirty-seven years old.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife. An exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes. Twenty-one years old.

Consort Lihua
One of the Emperor's consorts. Has a bountiful bosom. Twenty-five years old.

Kokuyou
A doctor. He's handsome enough but has smallpox scars over half his face. He's suspiciously cheerful for a man with such a tragic past.

Aylin
Formerly an emissary from Shaoh. A beautiful woman with golden hair and blue eyes, she fled to Li for asylum after losing a political battle.

The Madam
The old lady who runs the Verdigris House. Terrifying when angry.

The Emperor
A real go-getter and possessor of prodigious facial hair. Prefers his women well-endowed. Thirty-six years old.

The Quack
A eunuch in the rear palace and its resident physician. A plump older fellow with a mustache that resembles a loach's whiskers.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

The Shaohnese Consort and the Riddle of the Shrine Maiden

Maomao takes the court ladies' exam (under no small amount of duress) and becomes a medical assistant at court. Why invent a new post? It has to do with Aylin, the newest consort in the rear palace. She's fled her home country, claiming political asylum, but what is she really planning?

Then the shrine maiden from the neighboring land of Shaoh arrives for a visit. Publicly, it's a diplomatic mission, but secretly she's come to Li in hopes of treating an illness that won't seem to get better. As shrine maiden, however, no man may touch her. Instead, Maomao and the other medical assistants will have to perform the examinations.

What is this mysterious affliction the shrine maiden has? Does it have anything to do with what Consort Aylin seems to be brewing up for Maomao? What is the consort after? And can even Maomao help the shrine maiden?

Prologue

Jazgul's mouth hung open in amazement at the biggest boat she had ever seen in her life.

The boat was going to go down the river, go out to the sea, and then travel to a neighboring country, or so she was told. Jazgul was going to spend many days on the boat, more days than she could count on the fingers of both hands (which was as high as Jazgul could count). There were many people around who had come to see them off.

The boat was splendid. She had never dreamed she might ever ride on such a vessel. She came from a poor family; her parents had given her nothing but her name and the most meager of meals each day. Then, finally, they had sold her as a slave.

Jazgul couldn't speak. She could hear, but for some reason, she'd had no voice since the day she was born. She could work, albeit perhaps not as hard as many people. But her family had lacked the means to support her.

Jazgul had been sure she would become a "concubine." She wasn't so bad looking, and if her nose was a little bit low, well, her overall appearance was charming enough to make up for it. Yes, being a concubine would make her happy. It wasn't like being a "prostitute"; those had to work all the time, every day. A concubine, she'd heard, had just one man to please.

Thus when she had been brought to the large house, she'd been overjoyed, sure that she was about to become a concubine.

"What a pleasure to have you here" was the greeting with which she was received at that house. She'd heard that its owner was a regular old pervert, but nothing could have been further from the truth. Instead, she found herself serving someone very, very lovely. Someone with pure, white hair and who was the slightest bit plump.

No one was upset that Jazgul couldn't speak and didn't know how to read or write. Instead, she was given expensive paper and lots of ink and told that if she couldn't write, she should draw pictures instead.

She learned her duties diligently so that she might be of use in this place, and while she learned, she was able to eat plenty of food and wear beautiful clothing. She discovered that she served someone very kind, and

that drawing pictures was great fun. She would draw the scenery outside, or the owner of the house, or the senior servants. And, every once in a while, she would draw something she had seen in a dream. She'd had a dream once about riding on a boat, one just as big as the one in front of her now. When she drew that picture, the owner told her that it was an especially good one.

Yes, she had found very good work.

She was asked whether she wished to go with her mistress on a boat to a far country, and she decided that she did. She'd been on a boat once, after she'd been sold into slavery, but it had been awful. This boat looked much more fun. She hadn't gotten seasick even on the slave boat, so she didn't think there would be any problem with this one. But this person Jazgul served was frail and weak, so Jazgul would have to work extra hard and be extra energetic.

The person she served was sick, she gathered, with pale skin, white hair, and eyes as red as the flesh of a fruit. Skin that turned red and burned in the midday sun; this person couldn't even endure very bright places. But white skin and hair and red eyes were the signs of being chosen by God, and that made them special. Her mistress insisted the traits were not a burden. Jazgul thought her mistress lucky, and as if able to read her thoughts, a pale hand reached out and stroked her throat, and she was told that she, too, was special. She had something even more special than a voice. The thought made her very happy.

This person Jazgul served was very important, someone who had the ear of the king. Why would someone so important have to go so far away? The reason was work. They were so special that they could do things the king could not.

Jazgul served somebody very intelligent, who taught her many different things—but she found that the other ladies-in-waiting started to give her nasty looks if she spent too long with the mistress, so she couldn't be there very much.

"Hey, you ready?" called a hulking man who must have been one of the sailors.

Jazgul was practically bouncing up and down with excitement. She was so eager to get on the boat. Would this strange, distant land be full of spreading greenery like she'd seen in her dream?

"Jazgul," a voice said, and she started: her mistress was there, wearing a veil so as to evade the sun. Her face was covered in copious amounts of

salve, and an attendant diligently stayed close with an umbrella. The woman had to stand on her tiptoes, though—their mistress was almost a head taller than the lady-in-waiting.

"Honored shrine maiden, please board the ship quickly, if you would. Your skin will burn."

"Yes, I understand."

The skin-scorching sun was fearsome, but the breeze outside was pleasant. Red eyes squinted against the light.

Jazgul had it on good authority that the shrine maiden was already more than forty years old. Old enough for a person to be a grandmother or grandfather in Jazgul's village, where people rarely lived very long. In fact, Jazgul's parents were about that old. Their skin was tanned and wrinkled from long years of field work and tending livestock. The shrine maiden's lovely skin looked quite young by comparison. Perhaps she had been thinner some long time ago, but now she had a touch of paunch. That was a sign of wealth, and in Jazgul's village, would have been considered quite beautiful.

"This country we're going to—it has far more water than Shaoh."

Jazgul nodded obediently. The other ladies-in-waiting had told her that when she had decided to go.

"They grow wheat and rice there, and it's ever so green."

Grain crops were a luxury; even those who grew them found most of the fruits of their labor taken as taxes, and never got to taste them. Shaoh's urban center bustled with trade, but one didn't have to go far to find no end of indigent villages. When the bugs started to multiply, starvation was quick to follow. Jazgul herself had been sold because her family couldn't grow enough to eat.

It was very important that they become friends with a country that had lots of food. That was why the honored shrine maiden was going on this lengthy journey. They spoke a different language in this new country, but Jazgul couldn't speak anyway, so she wouldn't have to talk. She would, though, have to focus on learning to listen.

The shrine maiden looked at Jazgul and patted her head. Jazgul closed her eyes and smiled like a contented goat kid.

"I wonder, what kind of dreams did you dream last night?"

She'd dreamed of walking through a town abounding with beautiful water. Later, on the boat, there would be time to draw a picture.

As the sailors bustled about getting ready to go, Jazgul, the other ladies,

and the shrine maiden made their way to their cabin.

Chapter 1: The Court Ladies' Service Exam

"It's been a long time."

"Yes, sir. A long time," Maomao echoed, all but repeating the words of the man who stood before her. She had been idly making up some medicines at her apothecary's shop in the pleasure district when who should appear but the original fuzzy-feeling inducer, Gaoshun.

"If I may ask, sir, what's going on?" To her knowledge, Gaoshun was no longer Jinshi's attendant but was serving the Emperor himself. She braced herself: surely His Majesty didn't have some business with her?

"It's nothing. My son, curse his foolish hide, was supposed to come, but considering he recently injured himself in the most ridiculous way possible..."

So Gaoshun had come in his stead, rejoining Jinshi for a brief stint while the boy healed.

"Ah. Yes, his injuries were quite severe," Maomao said, recalling the recent events: it had been a real uproar in that corner of the court grounds. She could still picture the battered young man; it had been painful just to look at him.

"Yes, he was an absolute wreck," Gaoshun agreed.

"I'm impressed he survived."

"My son has always been durable, if nothing else." The remark might have sounded cutting, but Gaoshun's "fool son"—that is, Basen—had sustained those injuries while performing his proper duty. He had sacrificed his own health and well-being to save Consort Lishu, who had thrown herself off a balcony under the influence of the White Lady's drugs.

It was a laudable display, but aside from his right hand, every bit of him had either been broken, scratched, or torn up. Maomao was frankly amazed that he'd maintained consciousness.

"He swore he would go back to work on crutches, so I had to restrain him at home. He's currently recovering under the watchful eyes of his mother and older sister."

Maomao nodded with understanding as she opened a drawer. There had to be tea around somewhere.

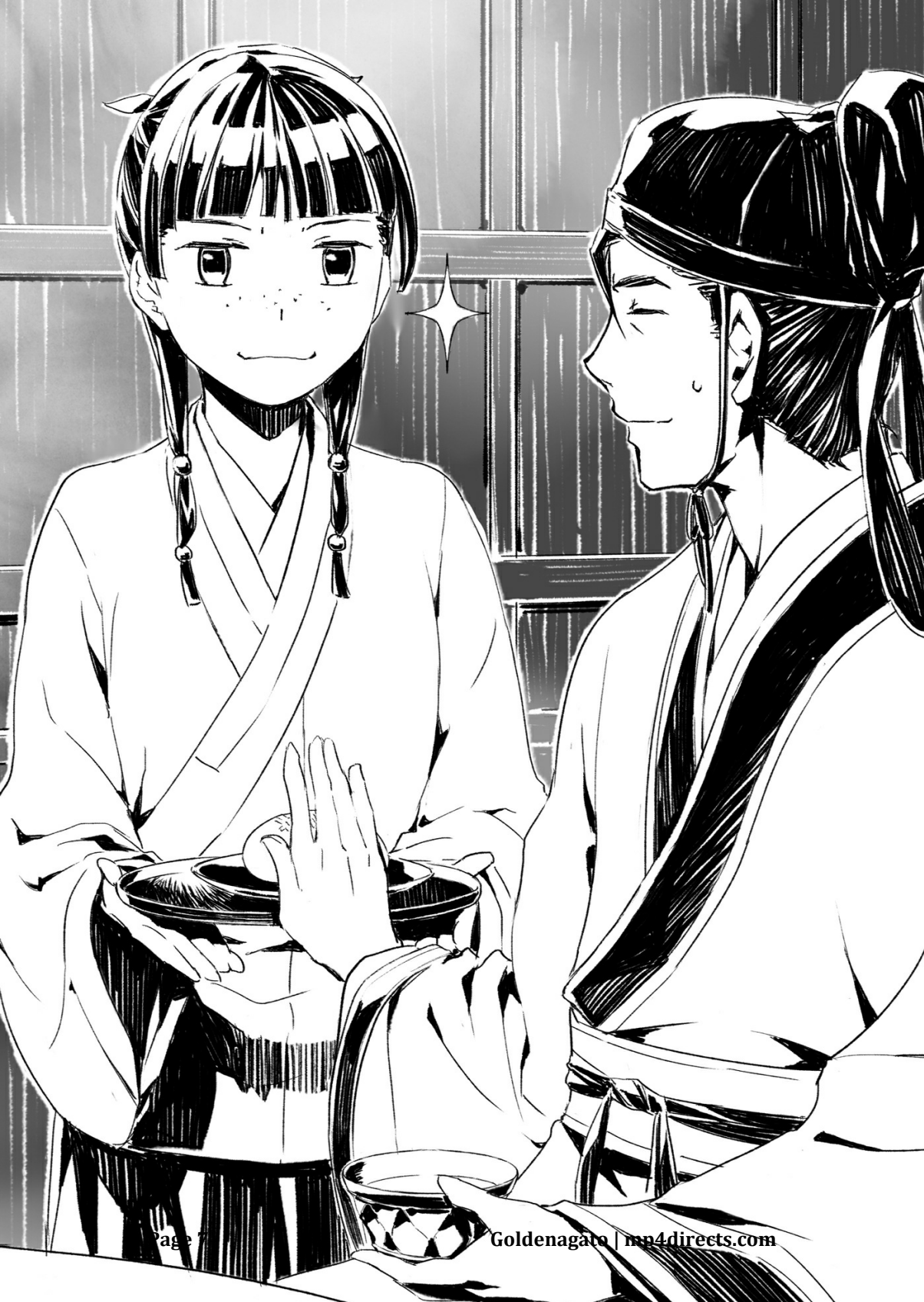
Gaoshun, however, said, “You needn’t mind me, Xiaomao.”

“You’re sure, sir? I have some buns from the main street that they say are gone by noon every day.”

She’d gotten them from the courtesans, who said they had been planning to give them to the apprentices until they realized they didn’t have enough and didn’t want to start a fight. There was only one of Maomao, so there wouldn’t be any jealous scuffling.

The buns consisted of steamed dough worked with brown sugar and yam; they were known for their delicate sweetness and rich exterior.

“You’ve convinced me,” Gaoshun said. He might have looked like a stern soldier, but he had an insatiable sweet tooth.



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Maomao prepared tea, taking some she'd made that morning and chilling it with well water. Being able to serve a cold drink to a guest during the hot season was the height of luxury. The madam didn't hesitate to allow Gaoshun to be served with a glass drinking vessel, something usually reserved for only their best customers. (Incidentally, Basen was served with something a step lower on the luxury scale.)

Gaoshun started in on the bun, a blissful smile on his face. What could he be there for? He certainly hadn't come just to trade small talk. When he realized Maomao was watching him, Gaoshun shoved the rest of the treat into his mouth and quickly washed it down with some tea. "Ahem! If I may turn to business," he said.

Maomao immediately had a bad feeling about this. "I've got another bun here, sir. Please, help yourself." She offered him the one she had been planning to eat herself. She liked wine better than sweets, anyway. Gaoshun was a thoughtful guy—she knew that one day the bun would come back to her in the form of some decent alcohol.

Gaoshun wolfed down the second bun, then cleared his throat. "Xiaomao, do you have any intention of becoming a medical official?"

"You know that's not possible." Women could not become court doctors, not under the nation's laws as they stood.

"Pardon me. I think I put the question the wrong way. Do you have any intention of reaching a station equivalent to that of a medical official?"

This time Maomao wasn't so quick to answer. A station equivalent to a medical official's: in other words, one that would allow her some access to the drugs in the medical office. She tried to keep her lips in a neutral, straight line, but she couldn't prevent a slight tremble.

A glint entered Gaoshun's eyes. "You could try out new drugs too. We have people who do that, you know."

Still Maomao was silent, but she felt her cheek begin to twitch and the corners of her lips start to edge upward.

No! Don't give in! There's a catch. There has to be.

The entire idea was too good to be true, and that meant it was a trap. Moreover, it was Gaoshun who had come to her with the suggestion. There would be no free lunches with him, and she knew it. Not to mention, there was this shop to think of. She had an apprentice apothecary, true enough, but he would start squawking if she left him alone again. He was far from ready to stand on his own two feet yet.

Okay, this is the part where I turn him down.

Gaoshun must have known things weren't going his way, because he struck first.

"You know Shaoh, of course? In the west? Do you remember the emissary from that country?"

"Ahh, you mean..." Aylin. That was her name. Maomao and Lahan had met with her on their recent sojourn to the western capital. The thought of her gave Maomao pause. This was the woman who had asked them to provide either provisions or political asylum. Even before that meeting in the west, she and a cousin of hers had come to Li.

Then again, Gaoshun had spoken only of an emissary. Maybe he meant someone else. Maomao chose the safest way of finding out: "You mean the two who were at the banquet where Master Jinshi worked so hard last year, yes?"

She could probably have described them as "the troublesome pair who were so eager to see the moon spirit from decades ago" without getting in trouble. The pair included Aylin, the woman she'd met in the western capital, along with another woman, Ayla. She was just as twisted as her cousin, and was strongly suspected of having sold the newest sort of firearms to the Shi clan. Both of them were walking trouble, without a doubt.

"I assume you know that Aylin was recently admitted to the rear palace as a middle consort."

"Yes, sir. And if I may ask, are you sure it's all right? Her arrival did seem awfully hasty."

"I'm not at all sure. Her being a foreigner, the other consorts and palace women are by no means well-disposed toward her. Not to mention, she didn't bring so much as a single maid with her from Shaoh." Considering her position, it seemed like a fair enough compromise—but it would also make her look rather sad.

"So that's how this involves me?" Maomao asked. If she occupied a status equivalent to that of a medical officer, she could enter the rear palace easily.

"Ordinarily, it would be ideal for you to enter as a lady-in-waiting. But..." Gaoshun's expression was conflicted.

Against all odds, Maomao had until the previous year been food taster to Consort—ahem, Empress—Gyokuyou. Then she had left that post and returned to the pleasure district. On direct orders, true enough, but for her to turn around and become another woman's attendant would have raised

too many questions. Not to mention Empress Gyokuyou herself might have gotten a bit bent out of shape about it.

“With the privileges of a medical officer, you can even be reunited with Empress Gyokuyou as an assistant. The thought made her very happy when we brought it up.”

“I haven’t agreed yet,” Maomao said, but she knew that if Empress Gyokuyou was already on board...

“Certainly. I have here a letter of recommendation from the Empress herself.” Totally unfazed, Gaoshun held out a letter to her. It was strange; she thought she’d seen something similar before somewhere. “And I have one from Master Jinshi as well.” Gaoshun came up with another letter. Maomao’s face began to twitch. “And here’s one from His Majesty.”

“I can’t imagine why His Majesty would...” Maomao physically backed away from this last and most sumptuous letter.

Gaoshun, his brow firmly wrinkled, slowly closed his eyes. “You recall how we once had you take the court ladies’ service exam so you could work in the outer court, yes?”

“Yes. And *you* recall I failed miserably?”

There had been a brief span when Maomao had worked as Jinshi’s direct subordinate. During that time, he and Gaoshun had urged her to become a qualified court lady, and many a thick tome had been pressed upon her.

“I do. We assumed you would pass easily. We knew how passionate you were in your study of drugs and poisons, and what a ready learner you are.”

“Yes, well, sadly, I’m afraid I let you down.”

Maomao wasn’t specifically a smarter person or better student than anyone else. She simply cared less about some things most people cared about, and instead shunted that extra attention into fields in which she was interested.

“Just to make sure I’m clear, Xiaomao, it’s not that you’re *incapable* of learning things that don’t interest you, it’s just difficult for you, yes? For example, you learned the ways of the pleasure district.”

“I wasn’t given a choice.”

The madam might have looked like a walking mummy, but she still had plenty of vitality. Maomao would have been disciplined for not learning what she was taught, and worse, she wouldn’t have been given anything to eat. Her father Luomen had tried to cover for her, but her retiring old man

was never going to win with the madam. Thus, in order to survive, Maomao had learned the ways of the pleasure quarter, calling on her "older sisters" to help her.

"All right, so what you're saying is you can learn something if you feel sufficiently compelled. A feeling which, I must observe, Master Jinshi's direct orders don't appear to have inspired in you."

Maomao backed away another step.

Gaoshun was holding three letters: from Jinshi, Empress Gyokuyou, and the Emperor. They might not be official communiqués, but nonetheless she felt she was being stared down by three of the least say-no-to-able people in the nation.

"By hook or by crook, Xiaomao, we *need* you to pass that test."

"E-Easy for you to say..."

Gaoshun threw open the door to the shop. A man who appeared to be one of his subordinates was waiting outside with a package wrapped in cloth, which he brought in and unwrapped to reveal a glittering pile of silver kernels.

"This time," Gaoshun said, and Maomao realized she could see the madam standing in the background holding one of her favorite disciplinary rods and eyeing the hill of silver hungrily. *Trapped!* Maomao thought. "This time, you're going to pass the test. No ifs, ands, or buts."

And that was the end of it.

Gaoshun's planning was a work of art. The madam had already been paid, the apothecary shop would be minded by the apprentice Sazen, and Maomao would be given a spare room in the Verdigris House in which to study.

Every once in a while, the little brat Chou-u put in an appearance and interrupted her work, but the madam or the menservants would always grab him by the scruff of the neck and drag him off. It was too bad for him, but he was interrupting Maomao while she was trying to study. What else did he expect?

In the room, they burned incense that was supposed to increase focus, and the dulcet notes of erhu and qin sounded from the next room, where courtesans who were especially talented musicians had been chosen to handle the instruments.

Studying was supposed to make you crave sweet things, but Maomao was instead offered salty rice crackers and cold fruit juice.

They'd thought of everything. *How much did this* cost*?* she wondered.

Cost or no cost, she frequently found herself wishing she could sneak in a little nap, but the madam made regular patrols, which put the kibosh on that idea. She herself, having been quite a high-class courtesan in her younger days, was more educated than the average person.

"Can't you recite even *one* of these poems?" she demanded.

"It's a medical exam! Why is poetry even on it?" Maomao shot back.

Strictly speaking, she wouldn't be taking the medical officers' examination, but rather the exam for court ladies who wished to serve in the medical office. There were a number of qualifications necessary to become a court lady, but the position of a court lady specializing in medicine was something new. In Maomao's opinion, if they were going to go to all the trouble of creating a new specialty, they should have taken the opportunity to get poetry off the test. "It's got nothing to do with medicine. There's history on there too—even sutra-copying!" she complained.

"Knowing history changes a person from the inside out. And the better your handwriting is, the easier it'll be to read. Copying sutras is excellent practice."

It figured that this was the moment the madam would talk sense. Maomao wished she would just say something like "Don't bother learning anything that's not going to make money," like she usually did. Maybe it was too much to hope for, given the amount of silver that was involved this time.

The characters the old woman wrote for Maomao to copy were lovely. Her hand might be like a withered branch now, but once upon a time she had boasted shining nails and fingers as nimble as fish sliding through the water.

Men liked women with beautiful handwriting. Men liked women with beautiful looks. She'd spent her life polishing herself for the benefit of men, and now here she was pounding the same lessons into the ladies of the pleasure quarter. If she'd been so beautiful, why hadn't she chosen some other life? Perhaps there hadn't been a choice.

Maomao voiced a thought that sometimes crossed her mind: "You can write beautiful characters and still say awful things with them."

She thought the next thing she felt might be the madam's knuckles crashing down on her head, but nothing happened. "No one knows if you're beautiful or filthy on the inside," the old woman said instead. "So you might as well write pretty." Then she looked at the examples

pointedly, as if to say *Now get to it!* The flawless, perfectly balanced characters looked like they could have been an answer sheet for the civil service examination itself.

"Yeah, okay," Maomao said, knowing the rod waited for her if she tried to slack off. She rolled up her sleeves and took up her brush.

The court ladies' test was administered with some regularity. Unlike the civil service examination, this test was taken exclusively by young women, who wouldn't serve for as long as the men, so there was frequent employee turnover and a constant need for fresh blood.

For the most part, the women who sought to become court ladies were the daughters of officials or rich merchant households; for them, court service was an achievement to boast as a potential bride, or else a way of finding a husband; very few women applied to the service out of a passion for the work. Maomao had experienced some nastiness at the hands of some of the court ladies during her time as Jinshi's attendant, and it certainly hadn't looked to her like the women had been taking their jobs very seriously.

The test took place in a school building in the northern part of the capital. The civil service exam proper was given in another city somewhere to the north of the capital, but for a test held as often as the women's service exam, it was much easier to do things in the capital itself.

After two weeks of nonstop studying, Maomao arrived at the examination disheartened. There were about a hundred people there, not surprising considering that it wasn't only aspiring medical assistants who were present.

There isn't much to say about the exam itself. It was over in a couple of hours, and Maomao was promptly on her way home. They had already checked her preliminary paperwork, not that she had ever expected to fail at that stage. She almost started to worry she'd passed because of special treatment.

No... If they were going to do that for me, then why would they make me do all that studying? She preferred to think that she could pass by her own merit. She was fairly confident in her work, anyway—if anything was going to trip her up, it would be the classical poetry and sutra-copying, subjects in which she had no interest. Frankly, if she had made a mistake on anything else, she wished they would let her know about it, because the medical-attendant exam had consisted of thoroughly elementary

knowledge of drugs and medicine. Maomao could have answered ten times as many questions as they'd asked in the time given for the test.

After dashing off the answers, Maomao had had nothing in particular to do, so she'd figured she would start walking home. And she would have, if only she hadn't heard the moronic voice.

"What? What do you mean, I can't take the test?"

There was some sort of argument happening in front of the testing center involving the official in charge of the examination and someone who looked like a test taker—but there was something strange about this particular examinee. They were dressed in women's clothing, but they were physically pretty large. Sure, there were tall women around, but this person also had a low voice...one Maomao recognized.

I feel like this isn't the first time I've seen something like this, she thought. She wished she could ignore the bad feeling she had, but she was unable to dismiss the bizarre scene.

"Why, sir? Why won't you let me in?" the "woman" asked, taking care to speak with impeccable politeness. Her face was hidden with a cloth, and at that point Maomao's suspicions turned to certainty. True enough, the person looked something like a woman, if you only looked at their face. They had attractive, balanced, and delicate facial features, to say nothing of a perfectly good makeup job. But the person was clearly speaking in falsetto, and the way they squirmed was particularly unappealing.

"*What* are you doing?" Maomao asked. She could have ignored the entire situation, but she felt bad for the official caught in the middle. He was a nice enough man. If Maomao had been in his place, she would have immediately called security. "Kokuyou!"

The "woman" was actually a man Maomao had first met on a ship coming back from the western capital. He had smallpox scars over half his face, which was what the cloth was covering. He was a doctor, but sadly, the scars kept him from being able to get much in the way of decent work. On the other hand, his idiotic personality couldn't be chalked up to misfortune.

"Oh, Maomao! Haven't seen you for a while! Listen, you won't believe this! This mean man won't let me take the exam!" He winked at her with his one visible eye as if to say *Play along!* She wished he wouldn't do that. It was creepy.

Doesn't matter if I did want to play along with him. "The test is over already."

“What? You’re kidding!” he screeched, putting his hands to his cheeks theatrically. Very helpful.

“The poor guy is just doing his job. Come on,” Maomao said, and dragged Kokuyou away from the testing center.

It’s a frightful thing to be caught up in the flow of events: for example, the above led immediately, inexorably, to Maomao having lunch with a weirdo wearing women’s clothing. She wished he would change, but unfortunately, he hadn’t brought another outfit with him. (He had, he informed Maomao, borrowed the costume from the wife of the chief of the village where he was living, which caused Maomao to have doubts about *her* as well.)

“And here I finally thought I’d found my new job. So the next exam isn’t for two months, huh?”

“It doesn’t matter. You can’t take it. You’re not qualified. Although if you’re looking to get castrated, I’d be happy to help...”

“Oh, *please* don’t do thaaat!” Kokuyou said, shrinking back and squirming again. So creepy.

“I thought you were helping the old guy, anyway. What happened to that?”

Last Maomao knew, Kokuyou had been assisting an old doctor in a neighboring village. They’d seemed to get along well, even if the old guy was a bit of a weirdo.

“Gramps hasn’t been feeling too well lately. He said he thinks he’s gonna retire from medical work pretty soon, and that I should find somewhere new while the finding’s good.”

Maomao’s expression was conflicted, for she had an inkling of why the old physician might be feeling so weak.

“That was when I heard about this brand-new opportunity to be an assistant in the medical office!”

Well, check the requirements next time!

Actually, he probably had—that was why he’d shown up in women’s clothing. She still wished he would do something about that. He actually looked rather attractive and was drawing stares from some of the men around. His half-hidden face gave him an air of mystery too. If they’d heard his voice, though, it would have taken the wind out of their sails.

Maomao was eating a small, light bun, while Kokuyou was having some steamed dumplings.

“Gramps said he would give me the house if I wanted to stay in the village,” Kokuyou remarked. “There’s plenty of medicinal herbs around there too.”

“So you just take over for him. Sounds good to me. What’s the problem?” Maomao asked.

“It’s not that simple. Gramps was a former medical officer, right? People came from far and wide to see him because he had that authority. I don’t think people will come from far and wide to see some guy who just happened to turn up and take over the place.”

There was truth to that. Kokuyou might have gained some measure of trust from people in the village itself, but such a small settlement wouldn’t provide enough work to put food on the table. Gather and sell enough herbs and medical concoctions and you might just barely scrape by.

At that moment, Maomao held up her pointer finger. *These problems solve each other!* “Say, would you be interested in coming out to the pleasure district a few times a month?”

Kokuyou only had to think about it for a moment. “If you pay my traveling expenses, sure. And it would be great if I could get a meal out of it.”

“We have so much rice we can afford to sell some off, so I don’t think that should be a problem.” They had the rice and wheat they’d gained after the events in the quack doctor’s village, and now they had sweet potatoes as well, so many that they were thinking about stewing and candying them.

Maomao went on, “Your brief would be to teach medicinal and herbal knowledge to the apprentice apothecary there, and to continue supplying the herbs we’ve bought in the past. I’ll also want you to mix up any medicines the apprentice can’t manage, although he and our landlord, the madam, will need to vet anything you whip up.” That much was only fair when she was effectively asking a stranger of unknown origins to do the work. “The apprentice apothecary can handle running the shop, so you won’t even have to talk to customers.”

“Aww, but I’m a great salesperson!” Kokuyou said, squirming again. Considering he’d been unable to find a job precisely because his looks kept customers from wanting to talk to him, Maomao chose to ignore him.

“How’s this for a salary?” Maomao held up one finger. Combined with his work at the village, it would be enough to eat, even if it was on the low side for an apothecary’s compensation.

“How’s *this*?” Kokuyou said, pulling up a couple more of Maomao’s

fingers. Then they both burst out laughing. Maomao, though, also shot him a glare: for someone who acted like such an idiot, he sure had a keen sense of the market. So much for going by finger count; she ended up debating every nicety of the budget with him. At least she got to munch on a bun while she did it.

Chapter 2: Harassment

Sazen looked intensely relieved when Maomao told him she'd found another apothecary.

"I'm so glad I won't have to tend the shop all by myself again," he said. Frankly, Maomao would have preferred to hear an indignant "I can handle this on my own!" But very well.

The days after the exam were an all too brief interlude of peace. She'd done what she'd been told to do, but the two solid weeks of being allowed nothing but studying had brought her only pain. She was very pleased to be able to get back to working in the field and making some medicine.

A few days later, a letter arrived—her acceptance, she presumed, and as it happened, she was right.

"It would be a wonder if anybody failed that test," the madam had said when Maomao had told her about the contents of the exam. To get a perfect score was a real challenge, but a passing grade was only sixty percent. Even Maomao, who had relied mostly on cramming, figured she had gotten at least an eighty, and the women who had studied properly for the examination could hardly have done worse than her. Even when it came to the actual medical-knowledge portion, there were few specialized questions; most of the items would be easy enough to answer if you took your time and thought them through.

"Only a really smart person could think that. 'lo Grams, Maomao." Pairin slid into the room, looking particularly slovenly. This princess of the Verdigris House, one of three, must have had a customer the night before, for her skin was glowing. The customer, for his part, had probably been sucked so dry of his essence that he'd gone home looking like a withered fruit. Some people claimed that it was mastery of *fangzhongshu*, the arts of the bedchamber, that left Pairin's beauty undiminished despite the fact that, at well past thirty, she was the oldest courtesan at the establishment. "Just thinking about that stuff makes my head hurt. I tried to learn it, but it just won't go in my brain!" she said.

Well, everyone had different strengths. By and large you could achieve most things, more or less, if you worked hard enough, but there were some things that effort alone couldn't help with. Maomao's "older sister,"

Pairin, couldn't write very well; when she tried, the characters often came out backwards, as if in a mirror. The old lady had made several attempts to improve Pairin's handwriting, but the quirk remained, and she always had to have someone check her writing or simply write for her. However, almost as if to compensate, she was an unparalleled dancer; there was none better in the whole pleasure district.

"That's great that you passed and all, but so what? Do you even own clothes you can go to work in?"

"I assume that's their problem," said Maomao, perfectly happy to let someone else do the work and not feeling the least bit obliged to make any special preparations herself. Even the day before the test, a messenger had arrived from Gaoshun bearing clothing and writing utensils. She got the impression the messenger had also been intended to accompany her to and from the testing center, but having a babysitter like that had sounded like a headache, so she'd ignored him. For better or for worse, it had left her free to end up having lunch with the cross-dressing Kokuyou.

The acceptance letter said that everyone who had passed the test was to assemble at court the day after next before each heading to their assigned departments. It was accompanied by a wooden token scorched with a symbol of a flower. Her ticket into the palace grounds, she figured.

Maomao *hmm*ed and put the letter on top of the medicine cabinet, then set about grinding some herbs.

Come the day after next, Maomao went to the place indicated by the letter; it was near a building bustling with civil officials, and not far from the medical office. She judged that she saw about eighty percent of the test-takers among the acceptees, and knowing that eight out of ten applicants had passed the test made her doubly glad she hadn't washed out. On the other hand, she also found herself with a little more sympathy for how exasperated Jinshi and Gaoshun had seemed when she'd failed the last time.

The ages of the assembled women ranged from fourteen or fifteen to about twenty years old. A handful were older than that, but Maomao couldn't shake the sense that she detected a gleam in their eyes. (She preferred not to think too hard about the reason, namely that they were probably joining the palace service in hopes of finding a husband. It was a matter that came to feel ever more pressing as one got older.)

Actually, I think it's ideal to be at least twenty before you become a

mother. It was common for girls to get married at fourteen or fifteen and start having children, but the body wasn't fully developed at that point. Some women hadn't even had their first period by then. A few years after the "monthly visitor" had arrived and was coming reliably, then you could be sure the body was mature enough to bear children. Marrying too young was, in Maomao's opinion, not a good idea.

The pelvis has to be firm, or it's tough to deliver the child, she thought, her hand brushing her hip. She didn't expect her own body to do much more growing, but if she ever somehow found herself pregnant, it wouldn't hurt to have a little more meat on her bones. Birth was considered kissing cousins with death.

Maomao was keen to try giving birth at least once, but that wasn't something you could just go around saying. People might think you were simply being crass if you claimed you wanted to give birth as an experiment. Besides, if they knew the *other* thing Maomao thought on the subject, they would probably get upset. Namely: *I wouldn't be able to get a decent placenta out of it.*

When a child was born, the placenta was expelled. There were certain regions where the mother would then eat the discarded placenta as a way of strengthening herself. It was said to be quite tasty—like liver sashimi. Of course, animal liver might have parasites in it if you tried to eat it raw, but a placenta should be safe. It would have been part of her own body, after all.

Maomao's father had always sternly warned her not to use any part of a human as an ingredient in her medicines, and likewise not to have any contact with dead bodies, lest terrible curiosity boil up within her. But her own placenta—what about that? It wasn't a dead body, and it wouldn't be like she was using someone else for her ingredients. It was a part of herself! What would be wrong with taking it back in? In short, it would be a way for Maomao to explore an aspect of medicine with which she'd heretofore been unacquainted, while still respecting her father's rules. Of course she wanted to do it.

"Everyone, over here please," an older court lady said. Her gaze was sharp. They'd all been given a standard uniform to wear, but some people had embellished theirs with special modifications. Among peacocks, males had the ostentatious plumage, but with humans the females of the species were the more lavishly attired.

Maomao had simply worn the uniform as it was given to her. She

didn’t think she should be at all conspicuous, so why did she feel like people were stealing little glances at her? *Am I wearing it wrong?* she wondered. It was the same plain, sleeved dress everyone else was wearing. For her, the top was a light pink, the bottom red, but the colors varied by each person’s assigned department. There couldn’t have been five people wearing the same colors as Maomao. Assistant to the medical office was still a new post, so maybe there just weren’t very many of them yet.

If there was anything that really stood out, maybe it was the band in Maomao’s hair. She felt like hers was a slightly darker color than everyone else’s. Deciding there was no need to give it too much thought, she went over to where the older court lady had indicated and stood in line with some other women—when she bumped into something.

No, no; that wasn’t what had happened. Before she could even stick her hands out, she was on the ground. Perhaps she was lucky her nose didn’t stick out too far, for she went face first and ended up covered in dirt from forehead to chin.

She got back up, wiping her face with her palm, not saying a word. At least her nose wasn’t bleeding.

“Oh my goodness, I’m sorry!” said a woman with an elegant smile on her face. She was wearing the same colors as Maomao, as was everyone walking by with her.

“Are you all right?” the older court lady asked, hurrying over.

“It’s nothing,” Maomao said, her face impassive. But she thought, *This brings back memories.* She was in a workplace full of women again, and the inevitable consequences of that nearly brought a warm glow to her heart.

The first day of their employment was to be spent being indoctrinated with the principles of court service. Thus the new court ladies, who numbered fewer than a hundred, were escorted into a large hall where they were lectured by their more experienced counterparts. Maomao herself had once given a lecture in a similar hall in the rear palace, which was all well and good, but frankly, listening to *other* people talk made her sleepy.

There were more than enough chairs and desks for all the attendees, so the newly minted court ladies sat in clusters according to their assignments. Except no one sat near Maomao; the woman who had bumped into her earlier sat in a group somewhere in front of her.

Most women who became court ladies were the daughters of officials,

or sometimes of prosperous merchant households, and it seemed that just as in the rear palace, squabbling amongst the ladies was not uncommon. In the rear palace, however, there had been a certain hunger in the air, a sense that the low could overcome the high. Not so here, where it seemed more important to figure out where best to position yourself in the existing hierarchy, a fact that was obvious from the way small cliques had already formed. You could tell who ruled each one just by the way they walked.

I guess having an important daddy makes you an important little girl. A no one from nowhere like Maomao would obviously be excluded from such a system, or at least made to understand her place. It gave their behavior earlier a certain logic. Nonetheless, Maomao thought it was childish.

After almost an hour's lecture, the women were split off by department, Maomao heading to the medical office with the other ladies who had received that assignment. There were actually several medical offices around the palace grounds; for example, the one Maomao had often gone to while working for Jinshi was in the western quarter. That was where her old man, Luomen, was assigned. There was another office on the eastern side, which was where they seemed to be headed.

Maomao scowled: the western side of the palace grounds was home to many civil officials, while the east was the province of the soldiers. Her father had been assigned to the western office as an act of consideration, to allow him to avoid the soldiers as much as possible, although it hadn't done him too much good in the long run.

And why had he wanted to avoid the soldiers? For the same reason Maomao did.

How did he find me already?

She'd been trying to follow the other women as quietly and inconspicuously as possible. Their group garnered glances from the brawny military men as they went by; Maomao excepted, the new court ladies were all young and lovely. Of course the men would want a quick look.

It was well and truly summer now, the sticky season. Just walking around was enough to make you start to smell of sweat. The men were working out with their shirts off, drawing interested gazes from the court ladies as they went by.

And somewhere in the middle of it all was a most unsettling shadow, following the group from behind. Maomao tried to ignore it, but she kept

seeing it out of the corner of her eye. Maybe the person thought they were being sneaky, but they were terrible at it. Who was this strange figure? He had no facial hair, eyes like a fox, and a pointless monocle (maybe he thought it made him look fashionable). By now you ought to know who we're talking about. One wouldn't wish to say his name.

"Who's *that*?" some of the ladies began to whisper.

He's more important than you might think around here...

There were higher-ranking military officials out there, but most of them were to be found at desks in the central part of the palace complex. This man had the title to make him important, but seemed to have a lot of free time to waste hanging around.

When they realized the eccentric strategist was on the scene, the other soldiers stopped trying to steal glances at the passing ladies and became hilariously serious about their exercise. There was an ironclad rule among the soldiery: don't get involved with him. He always meant trouble, and lots of it.

Obnoxious, Maomao thought. She wanted to hurry up and get out of there, but the older court lady went ever so slowly, and there was nothing she could do. Although the woman's skirt hid her feet, Maomao suspected from the movement of her hips that they were bound. *Can't be easy to walk like that.*

The new court ladies, five of them including Maomao, all walked with a spring in their step. With this many officials' daughters in one place, Maomao might have expected at least one of them to have bound feet, but by coincidence, all their feet appeared to be good and healthy.

"That is the medical office," the lady leading them said, pointing to a stern, sturdy building near the training grounds. It was certainly less pretty than the western office.

It was then that Maomao heard shouting from behind them. Everyone turned to see a man being borne on a stretcher. He was limp, and there were bruises all over his body.

"Make way! We're taking this man to the medical office!" shouted some well-built soldiers, hustling the stretcher along in a way that suggested this was nothing new to them.

"Let's follow them," someone said, and Maomao and the others went after them.

They arrived at the medical office to find the soldiers looking worried. "What's the matter?" Maomao asked.

“Well, normally there’d be a doctor here,” one of the men said. But there was no one inside, not even a note saying that the doctors were out or when they would be back.

The injured man had been laid on one of the cots, still limp. Maomao couldn’t help looking at him: along with his bruised skin, she saw he was still young enough that he had no beard, while his tanned skin showed that he trained hard outside every day.

“What caused him to collapse?” Maomao asked, looking into the young man’s face.

“Now just a second, you!” one of the other new medical assistants said, but the older court lady stopped her. She gave Maomao a look that said, *Take care of him, if you know how.*

“We were training, and he suddenly dropped. We didn’t hit him anywhere too bad...I think,” one of the soldiers said. He didn’t sound very happy about it—maybe because it was obvious to see that they had been working this man to the breaking point. Then again, maybe it was the freak, half-visible peering through the window, that was making him uncomfortable.

The injured man was sweating, and his body temperature was normal. The only thing Maomao noticed was that his pulse seemed somewhat slow. “I’m not so concerned about where you hit him,” she said. She took several washcloths from the office’s supply and put them in a water jug, then laid them over the young man’s body to cool him down.

“May I use supplies from the medicine cabinet?” Maomao asked. She was directing the question at the older court lady, but the response was strange. Instead of the woman answering immediately, the person outside the window raised his thumb. When she saw that, the woman replied, “Yes, you may.” So the freak was an eyesore, but he could be a useful eyesore.

Maomao put some water in a bowl, then added salt and sugar, just like she had when Jinshi had collapsed in the heat during the hunt. The young man here had succumbed to heat-induced dehydration. She gently lifted his head, wetting his lips with the water in the bowl. As he started to come to, she let him drink on his own.

The soldiers who had been working the young man looked relieved, although Maomao had half a mind to glare at them as hard as she could. As she was resoaking the lukewarm washcloths to continue to cool the young man, there came a sound of applause.

Several men in white overgarments, showing that they were doctors, appeared. One of them was elderly, the other two of middle age.

"You pass," one of them said.

"Wh-Who passes? Passes what?" asked one of the newly minted court ladies.

"Passes what? Did you really think we would consider you qualified to be our assistant on the basis of a simple written exam? We just wanted to get a look at you all."

In other words, they had been hidden somewhere, watching what Maomao and the others did. Not very nice of them.

"If you didn't look like someone we could use, we could have cut you loose right here and now," said the elderly physician. He was taking a drink from the water jug and looking at Maomao with what might have been regret.

This guy is going to be trouble. I can smell it. Maomao had to be careful her private assessment didn't come out her mouth. Incidentally, the eccentric strategist was still peering in from outside, but for the moment, she figured she could safely ignore him.

Chapter 3: Medical Assistant

The five new medical assistants, including Maomao, would spend the first month of their employment at the medical office near the army training grounds, learning the ropes. Why that particular office? Because it was the busiest by far.

It didn't matter that Maomao had Jinshi's personal recommendation; she received no special treatment. If she wanted to go to the rear palace, she was going to have to prove herself through her work. Every day, soldiers were carted into the office for care. Scrapes, scratches, and cuts were the assistants' bread and butter, but more than once they had to stitch someone up too. It certainly was the perfect way to get accustomed to the job.

Maybe they're more serious about this than I thought, Maomao said to herself. Both the new department, which she'd thought might be purely an outward display, and her colleagues, whom she had assumed were only there to find suitable marriage partners.

Two of them look particularly dedicated. Of the other four new court ladies, two went about their work with noticeable verve: one whom Maomao had taken to be a leader of the gaggle of women, and another who seemed inward and quiet.

As for the remaining, less enthusiastic two women, they fainted at their first sight of blood. After a few days, they had started to get used to it, although they still looked disgusted on a regular basis. Maomao wasn't sure it was the best idea to make faces like that at sweaty, muddy soldiers.

"En'en, grab me some of those bandages."

"Yes, Lady Yao."

So the demure, quiet woman, En'en, appeared to be the attendant of the court lady named Yao. In this office, they were technically colleagues, but it was clear from their interactions that there was a difference in status between them.

Yao was a well-developed and vivacious young woman; even without palace work on her resume, there must have been many people who would have been happy to have her for their bride. En'en was less outgoing, and didn't show much expression, but she had a pretty enough face, and she

exuded an unmistakable competence.

Maomao was washing bandages as fast as she could. They were going to be wrapped around open wounds, so they had to be as clean as possible at all times. After washing, they were boiled to disinfect them and then dried.

Maomao's colleagues continued to give her a hard time. They spared her only the bare minimum of conversation—although since Maomao tended not to initiate talk either, it was a little hard to say who was at fault there. The doctors intended to make full use of the ladies, and since Maomao already knew how to do the work, she rarely had to ask for help. She just did things. The result was that she finished jobs without being particularly friendly with anyone.

She was just putting the boiled bandages out to dry when one of the physicians said, "Might I ask you something?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you finding anything difficult about this work?"

The doctor looked familiar. After a second, she realized he was the medical officer she'd become acquainted with while working for Jinshi.

"Nothing specific, sir."

"And I notice you eating by yourself at mealtimes."

"The food here is delicious, if I may say so."

For one thing, it actually tasted like something—the medical office was probably served the same stuff as the soldiers—and unlike at the rear palace, you could get seconds.

"That's not what I'm getting at. Doesn't it hurt that the others are obviously ignoring you?"

"Things might be easier for them if they would ask questions of me, sir, but the reverse isn't really true." If anyone was disadvantaged by the silent treatment Maomao was getting, it was the ones giving it. Okay, so sometimes she missed important messages because no one told her about them, but every time one of the doctors tried to give her a dressing down, he found a freak glaring at him through the window, and eventually the scoldings stopped. The freak's appearances continued, however, such that he had to be dragged away by his subordinates several times each day.

In fact, it must have been the physicians, trying to teach, who were put in the hardest position by the rift among the ladies. Maomao did feel a little bad for them. "I'm afraid I'm not really sure how to make friends with them... But I might know a little something about how to handle that

freak.”

There was a beat. “Please, tell me.”

The trick was simple: invoke Luomen’s name. She felt bad for her old man, but it really sucked having the freak constantly lurking around. Another tactic you could use was to give him a record of a game of Go; he would be a good boy for as long as it took him to read it. The risk was that if he saw any particularly bad moves, he might go into teaching mode.

“May I ask you something else?” the doctor said, keenly aware of the monocled old dude peering at them from the shadows of the trees. When had he gotten back? His gaze was focused, sharp as a knife, on the physician talking to Maomao. “What exactly is your relationship to the honored strategist?”

“He’s a stranger to me,” Maomao said.

“But surely...”

“A *total* stranger,” she said firmly, and went back about her work.

When she started working in the medical office, Maomao took up residence in a nearby dormitory on the palace grounds. The pleasure district wasn’t so far away that she couldn’t have commuted, but there was a desire to avoid any unpleasant rumors should word get around about where she was living. She was concerned for her apothecary’s shop, but knowing that Kokuyou would be keeping an eye on things put her mind somewhat at ease.

Her old man was likewise living in a dormitory. The physicians had frequent night duty, and more than a few medical officers had ended up all but living in the “on-call room” near the medical office. Even Maomao’s father seemed to go back to his dorm only rarely. As for Maomao, her room wasn’t big, but it wasn’t small; there was a bed, a dresser, and enough space for a writing desk, so she had no complaints.

There also happened to be a bookshelf. Books were too expensive for her to buy very many, but you could borrow the books at the medical office if you asked permission. All in all, Maomao found life here fairly congenial. The only problem was that everyone had to prepare their own meals. There was a restaurant not far away, but Maomao often borrowed a stove to make congee for herself.

She sat on the bed and opened some mail that had evidently arrived during the day. There were two letters: the first was from the pleasure district, informing her about how the shop was doing. The madam was

leery of Kokuyou, but *so* far he hadn't done anything to give her cause for concern. Sazen seemed to be doing well enough too.

The other letter was from Jinshi. It had come in Gaoshun's name, but the handwriting was Jinshi's. It read like a basic rundown of what had been going on recently, with nothing that would be problematic if seen. In fact, he was talking about the new middle consort at the rear palace—Aylin, the woman from Shaoh. Just in case the letter should be intercepted by some unintended recipient, she was written of in terms of a "beautiful flower" from a foreign nation.

Still, something was strange. This new woman certainly had her quirks, but when she'd come to the rear palace, she had done so alone. Why be so cautious of her? Maomao finished reading the letter and put it away in her letter box. Aylin, the report related, didn't seem to have done anything suspicious yet.

Some days later, she would understand. But at that point in time, she had no way of knowing.

Maomao was pretty used to the medical office by now. Each day she would work, and the freak strategist would peer endlessly through the window, until her old man came and collected him.

Her father, Luomen, had a bad leg, so it wasn't very nice for him to have to make the round trip repeatedly. Recently, he'd taken to having the freak hauled away on a cart. It didn't look very comfortable, but her father was missing the kneecap of one knee, so what was he supposed to do?

"Hmm?" Maomao said. Luomen had just appeared again—hadn't he dragged the freak away just a few minutes earlier? Maybe he'd forgotten something, she thought, but he came into the medical office. Maomao grabbed the dry bandages and went inside. The other court ladies were already in a neat line. Apparently she had once again been left out of the loop. Scowling, the medical officer told her to get in line.

"I'm planning to go to the rear palace today, and I'd like an assistant," Luomen said. So that was what had brought him here. The rear palace had the quack doctor, but recently Luomen had been going there too. The other palace physicians still had their most important of possessions, so only the eunuch Luomen could enter the rear palace.

"If you're looking for volunteers, I'll go," said Yao, the one who seemed to be in charge of the other court ladies, stepping forward. As soon as she did so, two of the others joined her.

“I’m afraid we’ve already decided who’s to go,” the medical officer said.

Yao gave him a look. “Would that be referring to this young lady?” she asked, glancing at Maomao but not deigning to use her name.

Maomao didn’t much care if Yao didn’t want to remember her name, but she wished she wouldn’t try to interfere with her going to the rear palace. That was supposed to be the whole job she was here to do.

“She only ever does the laundry,” interjected another of the court ladies, one whose name Maomao hadn’t bothered to remember herself. “I don’t even know if she *can* do real medical work. Although I suppose she’s all right at cleaning up. Do you suppose she’s better suited to being a maid than a court lady?” Two of the women snickered to each other.

I have to do it because you *don’t*, Maomao thought. She wasn’t particularly offended by the idea of being a maid as such, since she’d been exactly that for quite a while. She did wish, though, that they wouldn’t try to stop her from doing her literal job.

Just when she was thinking maybe she needed to say something back to them, the second medical officer—the elderly one who’d tested the women upon their arrival at the office—clapped a hand on the anonymous ladies’ shoulders, smiling, and said, “Yes, I see. You two can go home now.”

The sudden pronouncement left them wide-eyed. “B-But why?” one of them asked.

“Because I told you *all* to make sure to do the laundry, yet you seem to have decided it doesn’t fall within the scope of your duties. And you think I can keep you here like that? I particularly dislike that kind of person.” His tone was gentle enough, but it was clear there would be no arguing. “You *did* pass the test, but I’ve discovered you’re not cut out for medical work. You’ll be able to go to a different department instead, but you should prepare yourselves for the fact that most places do *much* more laundry and cleaning than we do here.”

With that, he gestured to the younger medical officer to show them out.

“L-Lady Yao!” one of them exclaimed, hoping for a lifeline. Yao and En’en, though, just looked at her. Maomao had taken them to be such a clique, but it turned out maybe they weren’t so close after all.

The doctor turned to Maomao, the other two remaining court ladies, and Luomen and said, “Now that it’s a little quieter in here, perhaps I should add one more thing. There’s something else I despise: nepotism.”

Luomen’s eyebrows knitted in an expression of consternation.

Don't tell me, Maomao thought, looking from one of them to the other. She'd believed she had successfully passed the test, but judging by the men's looks...maybe she hadn't. Even if she had, there was no denying that productivity had taken a hit since her arrival thanks to the constant incursions of the freak strategist.

"Those who are *not* here because of family connections are invited to demonstrate it through the excellence of their work. That's all I have to say. Now, hurry off to the rear palace or wherever it is you're going."

Maomao's old man, still looking concerned, gave a dip of his head. He ended up taking all three of them with him to the rear palace.

Chapter 4: The Rear Palace

Be they a palace woman or a eunuch, all those entering the rear palace were subject to a physical inspection. Maomao and her old man were used to it, but Yao and En'en seemed to find it pretty embarrassing. They recoiled at the idea of being touched by a eunuch; the looks on their faces all but screamed *Don't touch us!* Luomen finally gave up and summoned one of the rear palace women.

"This is the only time," he advised them.

"Yes, sir," they said. At least it looked like they weren't going to argue with him. Still, Maomao couldn't shake the sense that their attitudes toward him had taken a turn for the worse since they'd found out that he was a eunuch. *That's hardly unusual.* Eunuchs were widely dismissed and looked down on. Luomen himself was all too used to this, and it seemed to roll off his back, but it still made Maomao angry.

It felt so familiar to be back in the rear palace. In this garden of women, the only men around were eunuchs. It was a strange situation—and yet here, it was also perfectly ordinary. The combination created some real characters.

People kept sneaking glances at Maomao and the others; when you couldn't come or go freely, you developed a sensitivity to anyone from the outside world. Eyes shone as they fixed on the newcomers, wondering if they might have any interesting gossip to share. Maomao even recognized a few of the faces they saw. It was no one she was especially close to, just maids who had been around sometimes when everyone was chatting at the laundry area. They were openly perplexed by the way that every time Maomao got out of the rear palace, she seemed to wind up coming back.

To begin with, Luomen headed straight for the medical office. The two other court ladies looked around in fascination as they went, but Maomao and her old man betrayed no special interest in the place as they walked along. That must have bothered Yao, because for once, she spoke to Maomao.

"Why do you look so used to this?" she asked.

"Because I worked here for two years." Not quite consecutively, but she'd been there until the past autumn. "That's the term of service for

ladies in the rear palace."

Telling the whole tale would have been a pain, so she left it at that and hoped Yao would too. That put an end to the conversation, and they were silent until they arrived at the medical office, where they found a familiar loach-mustached man fast asleep.

"Hello?" Luomen said apologetically, catching the man right in the middle of a snore, which turned into a snuffle, then a grunt, and then the quack doctor sat bolt upright.

"Oh! Oh, Luomen, it's you," he said. "And the young lady! It's been quite a while." He walked over to them, his hands clasped around his large belly. It had been several months since Maomao had accompanied him to his home village.

Speaking of nepotism, she thought, remembering what the medical officer over by the military camp had said.

"And who are your friends there?" the quack asked, looking at Yao and En'en. The two of them seemed a bit conflicted. This man was a eunuch, but he was also a medical officer, and while that was easy enough to grasp intellectually, they seemed to be struggling to decide exactly how to behave toward him.

Either unable or unwilling to read the look on their faces, the quack said, "Who wants some tea and snacks?" He started rifling through the medicine cabinet. In one sense, his ignorance was indeed his bliss.

"These three are court ladies who are going to be helping in the palace medical offices in the future," Luomen explained. "I've brought them with me today as an experiment. You and I alone can't handle the entire rear palace forever. Didn't you get my message?"

At that, the quack glanced guiltily at his desk, where there was an unopened letter. But let's spare him any further embarrassment on the subject.

"Ahh, yes, of course," he said, as if, in fact, he had been entirely aware that they would be coming. "And what do you plan to have them do?"

Maomao knew this was pretty standard for the quack, and her old man was giving him a wry smile; meanwhile, Yao and En'en had already started to sense that there was something wrong here and were looking at the quack suspiciously. Maomao guessed that it wouldn't be long before they figured out what a quack he was.

"We're going to visit Consort Lihua's pavilion today, and then the middle consorts."

Among the high consorts, Loulan had disappeared after the Shi rebellion, Gyokuyou had become Empress and left the rear palace, and Lishu was effectively stuck in her nunnery. Lihua was the only one remaining in the rear palace.

I heard she gave birth to a boy. I wonder how he's doing, Maomao thought. It had been a long, long time since she'd last seen Consort Lihua. She had a certain attachment to the consort, whom she'd personally attended for a long stretch while nursing her back from an illness. It could be said that Lihua had had her share of misfortune, if perhaps not quite as much as Lishu. She'd gotten rid of her most problematic ladies-in-waiting, and Maomao wondered how things were going for her.

She was also curious about the real reason they were there—Aylin, the new woman from Shaoh. She was the entire reason Maomao had become a court lady in the first place.

"In any case, how about we start by heading to the Crystal Pavilion?" Luomen said, and then they were off.

Since they were visiting a high consort, they were accompanied not just by the doctor, but by other eunuchs who acted as bodyguards. Partly they were there for the safety of the medical officer, but they would also keep a close eye that no harm was done to the consort. Turnover wasn't that high among the eunuchs, so Maomao recognized their guards.

Ever faithful to their duty, the men only spoke to Maomao and the others when absolutely necessary, so she didn't even know their names. That didn't bother her, though. She figured that as long as she didn't cause trouble for them, they were happy too. She was perfectly content with these sorts of well-defined relationships.

Lihua, also known as the Wise Consort, had always kept a lovely house, and her pavilion was as stunning as ever. Now there were roses everywhere, a legacy of the time Maomao had borrowed a building on the grounds of the Crystal Pavilion to grow some; she'd given the consort all the flowers she hadn't used, and they had been planted all over. Maomao had grown only white roses, but the groundskeeper must have considered the colorless flowers a bit sad, for now there were red and yellow roses, and even a vibrant green variant. They could have renamed the place the Rose Pavilion. Maomao was only sorry they'd come near the end of the flowers' season.

The lady-in-waiting who had come to greet them saw Maomao

standing in the Pavilion's entryway and let out an "Eep!" Apparently not all of the old ladies-in-waiting had left, for several of them wore undisguised looks of distress when they saw Maomao. They never did cease to treat her like some kind of monster, and Maomao got the feeling that it was earning her renewed suspicion from Yao and En'en. For that matter, even her old man was looking at her, his anxious eyes asking: *Did you cause some kind of trouble even here?*

They were shown into the inner chamber, not the bedroom but the reception room. A few minutes later, there was a rustle of cloth, and a consort who looked like a gigantic rose herself appeared. She carried a plump young baby in her arms, its mouth working open and closed gently. There was a faint aroma of milk in the air, suggesting she had been feeding the child until a moment before.

Consort Lihua wore only a touch of rouge on her lips and no whitening powder on her face; she had such lovely skin that she hardly needed it to make her look more pale.

Maomao and the others followed the example of Luomen and the quack in how to greet the consort. Maomao was pleased to find her looking so healthy. The child in her arms had a fine pallor as well, and was now well past the age at which the former crown prince had died. Remembering that there really should have been another rambunctious young boy running around brought a pang of sorrow to the heart.

Empress Gyokuyou's son was now the presumed heir apparent, but the little boy in Consort Lihua's arms would be the next in line.

Unless they're still treating Jinshi as the heir apparent? The thought of the succession disputes that could arise gave Maomao pause, but at the moment she was just happy that the child seemed to be doing well.

"There's no need to spend too long on greetings. Could we go straight to my checkup?" Lihua said, passing the baby gently to Maomao. She was a little taken aback to suddenly find an infant in her arms, but the boy, unbothered to be held by a stranger, stuck his thumb in his mouth and smiled.

Babysitting isn't really one of my talents...

Maybe Lihua wanted Maomao to see the child. To know that the consort, who had been like an empty shell after the death of her first son, had given birth to this beautiful, healthy boy. Knowing that, who could fail to cherish him?

The new ladies-in-waiting who'd been brought into the Crystal

Pavilion proved quite good at their jobs: a chair was brought so that Maomao could hold the child securely, and a cup with a piece of absorbent cotton in it was prepared. If the child wanted some water, Maomao could put it to his mouth.

Meanwhile, Luomen began Consort Lihua's exam, taking her pulse. The quack stood by smiling, not doing anything in particular. In his place, En'en passed Luomen any tools he needed.

Maomao took a good look at the child. There was a bit of sweat around his neck, maybe because it had gotten rather warm. Other than that, she saw nothing out of the ordinary; he was the picture of health. She whispered as much to the grinning quack, who passed the message on to her father. Luomen seemed not the least bit surprised; he told the quack to get some medicine for sweat out of the medicine cabinet.

The most important thing was that the child was growing up healthy—but Maomao couldn't shake the sense that Yao was glaring at her the entire time she held the baby.

After Consort Lihua, they went to see the new middle consort from Shaoh. There were three spare high-consort pavilions available, but Aylin didn't live in any of them. Like the other middle consorts, she'd been given a more modest building to herself. So she wasn't getting any special treatment. It was located slightly east of the center of the rear palace, and looked like it hadn't been used for a while; the scenery around it was a bit desolate.

The ladies-in-waiting who came out to greet them smiled broadly at Maomao and the others and showed them inside. There were five of them, a pretty average number for a middle consort.

"Hello." They were greeted by the new consort, a woman with golden hair, wearing a wide-sleeved robe, probably an unfamiliar outfit for her. She was voluptuous and tall, her skin so pale it seemed almost translucent and her eyes the color of the sky. Certainly an appearance that made her stand out from the crowd.

You can understand why they thought they would make it in here on their looks alone, Maomao thought. Even if Jinshi had shown them up when he put on women's clothing. Anyway, it hardly mattered. Aylin had finally achieved what had then been her objective: to enter the rear palace. When she had arrived, she had not spoken well of the other former emissary, Ayla—had they had a falling-out sometime during the last year?

They certainly looked like they got along well enough. Maomao knew that women's friendships could be fragile and easily broken, but she couldn't help wondering what had shattered this one. She knew better than to ask, of course.

Aylin reclined on a couch, watching one of her ladies prepare tea.

She certainly checks all His Majesty's boxes. Notably, the curves. Foreign women tended to look older than they were, and Maomao had heard Aylin was only in her late twenties. The Emperor could certainly be energetic after dark, but Maomao also knew he was a sharp thinker. He had two perfectly healthy sons already; he didn't need to be in a rush to add a third. For that matter, if he had a child with a woman who had come seeking political asylum, it could be a source of much diplomatic strife later.

And there's enough sources of that already.

Maomao looked at the woman with whom Lahan had been so pleased to chat out west. At the moment, she sat demurely sipping her tea, but it was impossible to say what thoughts she harbored in her inmost heart.

The lady-in-waiting beside Aylin tasted the tea for poison and then poured it for the visitors. Luomen sounded unhurried as he began the conversation. "Have you gotten used to life in the rear palace?" Aylin spoke the local language fluently, but slowing down a little bit could only make it easier for her to understand.

"Yes, thanks to the kindness with which everyone has treated me." Her long fingers wrapped around her cup, a foreign-style mug with a handle. Her fingernails were conscientiously painted red. From the faint sweet aroma of the tea, Maomao guessed it was the fermented stuff they served in the west. She was eager to try a sip, but only her father and the quack had been given cups. *They included us at the Crystal Pavilion,* she thought. A bit of politeness on Consort Lihua's part, perhaps. Normally, it seemed, there was to be no tea for assistants.

Luomen started his examination by taking the consort's pulse. One thing that set him apart from the other doctors was that he wrote down numbers as he did his exams. He wasn't as mad about them as Lahan was, but he valued numbers greatly as concrete guides to a person's health. Now he placed a portable writing set on the table and began scribbling down figures.

Maomao noticed that his writing wasn't the ordinary kind. *Western characters?* she wondered. At a glance they appeared twisty, like

earthworms. Long ago, her old man had recorded his medical knowledge in characters like this, but Maomao had worked furiously to decode them, and he had ended up switching to another mode of writing.

Even as Maomao wondered why her father had decided to use those letters, she noticed several people stealing peeks at him and his writing. The quack clearly didn't have the slightest idea what any of it said and simply handed Luomen his tools as he asked for them. One of the ladies-in-waiting was brewing some more tea, but also sneaking little glances at the physician's notes. And there was someone else, too: En'en was taking it in with a subdued expression.

The notes didn't say anything particularly interesting. Even Maomao could read them. *Pulse normal, health good*—short, simple words like that.

"I don't see anything unusual," Luomen said at length.

"In-*deed*, sir?" Aylin's otherwise fluent speech still had an occasional lilt. Maybe it had something to do with the pronunciation of her native language. She kept taking little looks at Maomao—did she remember her?

With nothing out of the ordinary to report and their job completed, they were just about to leave when Aylin stopped them. "Since you've come all this way, perhaps you'd take some treats with you," she said.

She held out bundles of baked goods wrapped in lovely cloth. They seemed to be cookies in an unusual shape; the aroma of butter rolled off them. Only the court ladies were given snacks; the quack doctor was left to gaze enviously at the unique treats. Maomao would have to share a bit of her bounty with him when they got back to the medical office.

En'en's cloth, and hers alone, boasted a pattern rather than a solid color. Maybe Aylin hadn't been able to find three pieces of the same color cloth.

So no tea, but we get snacks? It seemed strange, but they couldn't refuse a gift. Maomao tucked the cookies in the folds of her robe and then her father led them off to the next consort.

The sky was turning red by the time they had visited the remaining middle consorts and headed back toward the medical office. It was about the time of day when Maomao, who always ate modestly, started feeling peckish. She wondered if she could entice the quack to serve up a little tea in the office.

"That takes care of the middle consorts, but we'll have to go around to

the lower consorts, and eventually see the ladies-in-waiting too," Luomen said genially. Maomao seemed to remember he only used to visit down to the middle consorts. It seemed he'd gotten busy lately. The quack was looking at him admiringly.

Luomen was back as a medical officer, and there were court ladies to help too. He was getting on in years and wouldn't be able to do these examinations forever; he probably intended to turn the work over to the court ladies eventually. Chances were he was also taking into account the fact that the population of the rear palace would be shrinking, which would make things easier in the long run.

Luomen didn't lead them to the medical office, but made for the gate they'd come in by. "I think we'd best be on our way home," he said.

"Surely you could stay a little longer?" the quack said.

Yeah! We've got snacks! Maomao added silently, but her father shook his head.

"I'm afraid we can't. There's more work yet to do."

The quack looked positively crestfallen. He didn't have many friends to share tea and a bite with, just the eunuchs who came by occasionally. Even Maomao's friend Xiaolan was gone, since her term of service had ended the year before. *I wonder how she's doing, anyway,* Maomao thought. Xiaolan was a sweet girl and had found herself work in a good part of town. Maomao thought maybe she should send her a letter soon.

The quack doctor was still looking sadly at their treats, so Maomao took hers out, intending to share some. She stopped when she noticed something odd: the cookies were essentially cylindrical in shape, and there seemed to be something inside them. She grabbed at one, managing to extract a small piece of paper. There was one in each of the cookies.

What's this?

She slipped the snack back into her robe and left the rear palace. As for the distinctly disappointed doctor, she decided to pretend she hadn't seen him.

Chapter 5: Fortune Cookies

Once Maomao got back to the dormitory, she pulled out the treats, opening the cloth and laying the cookies on top of it. There were seven in total, all with papers of about the same size inside them.

The heck is this?

The characters looked like a cross between snakes and earthworms. They were western characters, just like her father had been using; she thought she recalled that this was called cursive, a form of the letters adapted for writing quickly. The papers were covered with little clumps of two or three letters, but they weren't words; unlike the language of Li, in the west you had to put several characters together or they wouldn't mean anything. So she couldn't "read" the isolated, individual letters. Were they supposed to mean something?

She's testing us, Maomao thought. This consort certainly had her quirks. She was, after all, gutsy enough to enter the rear palace almost completely alone.

Realizing that she was being put to the test angered Maomao. But even more, it made her want to solve the riddle.

She looked from the cookies to the papers and back. Each of the papers had either two or three letters on it, and the papers themselves didn't have neat corners, but rather ragged edges, some of them on a bit of an angle. Maybe they'd been torn. The paper was stained with grease from the cookies, but thanks to the high quality of the material, it hadn't come apart.

This is awfully involved for a practical joke. What was the woman after? Maomao looked through the paper, but she didn't see anything.

She was still puzzling over it when there was a knock at the door. She answered it, a piece of paper still in her hand, to discover Yao and En'en standing there. They lived in the same dormitory—not that it mattered much to Maomao, seeing as they never spoke to her.

"Can I help you?" Maomao asked politely.

Yao, however, looked incensed. "I know you got some treats from the consort this afternoon. Give them to me."

Funny thing—Maomao didn't even have a special attachment to sweets, yet the moment she heard the demanding tone in Yao's voice, she

decided she wasn't about to hand the cookies over. To be fair, she could tell that Yao wasn't asking for them as a snack. So she decided to tweak her a bit.

"I'm very sorry, but I ate them for my dinner. Western cookies are rather papery, aren't they? Do you suppose they have germ in them?" She tried to make it sound like she could still feel the funny texture in her mouth.

The blood drained from Yao's face and she virtually pounced on Maomao. "Spit them out! Spit them out right now!" She was shaking her. Ah. Her cookies must have had paper in them too. "Where are the rest?! You couldn't have eaten all of them without noticing!"

"Lady Yao," En'en said, finally stopping her from the violent shaking she was giving Maomao. She looked as dispassionate as ever. "I think I detect a slight smile on Maomao's face, as if she thinks she's made a fool of you. I believe you're being teased."

So En'en remembered Maomao's name! And could read her expressions, no less.

"You're teasing me?! Is that true?!"

Jig's up, Maomao thought, straightening her collar and meeting Yao's eyes. "I admit I was having a bit of fun with you, but I might suggest you were uncivil to me first. I don't know what you have against me, but bursting into a person's room and trying to take their things is theft and nothing but."

What Maomao was saying was perfectly right and true; no one could have objected. The blood rushed back to Yao's face, until she was so red she looked like steam should be coming out of her like a teapot. She took a deep breath, then let it out again and looked straight at Maomao. "Was there anything unusual about the cookies you were given? If there was, I want you to give them to me. I'll pay you enough to get another snack."

"What do you mean by 'anything unusual'?"

"Anything, you know, unusual! Like, was there something weird inside them?"

The idea of getting some pocket change appealed to Maomao, but she couldn't let go of the riddle of the mysterious paper. She didn't want to just fork over the cookies. It sounded like Yao and En'en had found something similar in their snacks, but Maomao doubted they would be too eager to tell her what it was.

She glanced at En'en. The young woman played the part of Yao's

attendant to perfection, but when she looked back at Maomao, she seemed far more coolheaded than her mistress. *Maybe I should try talking to her*, Maomao thought, trying to figure out how to move the conversation along.

"If you're asking whether there was anything inside the treats I received, it implies there was something in yours, yes? If you tell me about it, I'll share what I know too."

Yao didn't say anything, but she looked awfully put out. En'en was watching her mistress's reactions closely. Maomao held out the piece of paper in her hand. "Show me what you found, and you can see the rest of these."

Each piece of paper had different letters written on it. If they were ever going to decipher the meaning, they would need all of them, which meant Maomao had no qualms about revealing just one.

"Where are they?" Yao said.

"You show me yours and I'll show you mine," Maomao replied.

Ultimately, she and Yao were equals. They'd both taken the same test and they'd both passed, so now differences in social status weren't supposed to matter. Many people might feel they still did, but here, at this moment, they were on even terms.

"Lady Yao," En'en said.

"Fine," Yao said at length. All she could do was nod her agreement. "But I won't have this conversation standing out in the hall."

"Certainly. In my room, then," Maomao said.

"No, in *my* room!" Yao responded. Maomao couldn't have cared less which room they talked in, but to simply roll over and let her have her way would have handed her the initiative.

It was En'en who saved the situation from becoming a stalemate. "How about we use one of the meeting rooms, then? I can go reserve one for us." She was referring to the dormitory's meeting rooms, which could be used for business—and locked for more private conversations.

"Very well. I'll get ready," Maomao said. She scooped the rest of the cookies into a carrying cloth and they left the room.

En'en succeeded in reserving one of the meeting rooms immediately. The place was big enough for at least ten people, which made it feel pretty massive with just the three of them in there.

"We each show what we have at the same time," Yao said.

"I know, I know," said Maomao. They were on either side of a long

table, with En’en sitting at the head.

They each opened their carrying cloths simultaneously, revealing piles of cookies numbering seven, seven, and six. One person had fewer cookies than the others—and that person was Yao, who looked bashfully away from Maomao. “I... I might have tasted one.”

“Ah,” Maomao said, seeing that one of the pieces of paper was partially torn, the characters damp. At least Yao had a full complement of seven pieces of paper. Like Maomao’s, each one had some letters on it.

Then there was En’en, who had cookies but no paper.

“You haven’t taken yours out yet?” Maomao asked, but En’en shook her head.

“None of mine had so much as a scrap in them,” she said, showing them the holes in the mysterious cylindrical cookies. It was clear there was nothing inside. If she was telling the truth, then they had seven and seven pieces of paper, fourteen in all. Could they make some kind of sense out of the letters written on them?

Maybe if we line them up the right way, we’ll see something? Maomao thought. Yao appeared to have had the same idea, because she was setting the pieces next to each other, trying them in different arrangements. She’d put slight folds in Maomao’s pieces so they would remember whose were whose. No matter how they swapped the pieces around, though, all any of them could do—including Maomao and En’en, let alone Yao—was stare at the letters, perplexed.

“Can you tell what it says, En’en?” Yao asked.

“I’m very sorry. I’ve only dabbled in Shaohnese. I can carry on a bit of a conversation, but this...”

So Maomao had been right—En’en had been watching her father write during the exam because she could read a bit of the language herself.

Yao turned to Maomao, though she wasn’t very happy about it. “What about you?”

“I’m not much better, I’m afraid. If I had actual words front of me I might be able to understand them, but putting them together from pieces?” She was probably about as likely as En’en to figure it out. As they arranged and rearranged the pieces of paper, she kept thinking it was about to come to her, only for it to not quite click. If they just kept trying combinations, she felt like they would hit on something eventually, but it would take a tremendous amount of time. Not to mention that, unfortunately, the letters on one of the paper pieces had been obscured by

teeth marks and spit and weren't legible anymore. Perhaps remorseful for what she'd done, Yao was a little less imperious now.

"I wonder if there's anything else that might serve as a clue here," Maomao said, looking at the cookies. All of the treats were the same shape. Well, not *identical*, of course, but you couldn't have told them apart with the naked eye.

"How do they taste?" Maomao wondered next, giving the cookies an experimental sniff. All of them smelled the same, and when she tried a few pieces, they tasted the same too: they made her tongue tingle slightly. There must have been ginger in the recipe, for flavor.

At this point, there was no way of knowing which piece of paper had come from which cookie anyway.

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“Do you think it’s possible there just isn’t any meaning?” En’en asked.

“You know, I remember hearing about some temple where they baked fortunes into their treats,” Yao said.

Fortunes. Might the letters on the paper strips refer to good or bad fortune? It didn’t look like it to Maomao. “But if these are supposed to be fortunes, why did one of us get cookies with nothing in them?” Maomao said.

The other two nodded. The consort hadn’t looked like she was making a deliberate decision about whom to give which cookies when she passed them out. But if they weren’t just snacks, then what—

“Could it be?” Maomao said. She looked at the cloth the cookies had been wrapped in. Hers and Yao’s were solid colors, but En’en’s had a pattern on it. She studied the pattern: there were angles everywhere; the cloth appeared to have been dyed only after the pattern had been applied. She could see something, ever so faint—were those brushstrokes?

“Look at this,” she said, spreading the cloth open on the table. She looked from the pieces of paper to the pattern and back again, then began to line up the papers with the angles in the pattern. Before long, she found that she had neatly filled all the gaps. “I knew it.”

The letters formed two rows composed of several words each. A message.

“Um... What’s it say?” Yao asked, squinting at it. It clearly bugged her to be the only one who couldn’t read the words.

“I see ‘pale’ and a question mark,” Maomao said.

“And this one means ‘to know,’ right? And this one...‘the truth’?” En’en added.

Between them they tried to work out what they could. Even with the faded and unreadable paper, by piecing together the rest of the context, they thought they could make sense of it.

“Does this say...‘woman’?”

“Looks like it.”

They put their heads together, and bit by bit they decoded the message, until they read: *Do you want to know the true identity of the pale woman?*

Maomao broke out in gooseflesh. *Give me a break!* She’d been so sure that was all over. Why was it coming back to haunt her now?

The pale woman: she had to be the one they called the White Lady. But she was supposed to be imprisoned, unable to do anything more. Did Aylin know something about her that she hadn’t told Jinshi or Basen? And why

would she choose to reveal it to some court ladies working as medical assistants?

“Who or what is the pale woman?” Yao asked, cocking her head. Apparently she didn’t know of the White Lady or all the talk she’d stirred up among the populace.

En’en only studied the row of letters quietly. For her part, Maomao thought this was something they should report to Jinshi immediately, but when she stood up, someone grabbed her wrist. It was En’en. “Where do you think you’re going?” she asked.

“Where? To report this, that’s where. We have to, don’t we?” Maomao was a careful person; she didn’t like having to keep dangerous secrets all to herself. What she was doing was perfectly rational.

“I think it’s the right thing to tell someone about this,” Yao said, for once taking Maomao’s side.

Maomao assumed that En’en would give in and follow Yao’s decision, but instead she said, “Just what kind of person would give a riddle like this to some medical apprentices she just met?” She looked at Maomao; the way she asked the question, it almost sounded like she thought Maomao knew Aylin.

I really don’t, Maomao objected privately. She did know one thing, though: Aylin was a skilled operator. Even if they went to someone with this story, she’d probably already prepared some way of getting out of it. Or could it be...

“Do you think this is some sort of test as well?” En’en said.

“A test?” Maomao asked.

When she thought about it, it seemed plausible. Candidates for the medical assistantship had been screened more aggressively than the other court ladies, and even those who passed the test could be cut loose without a moment’s notice if they were deemed unsuitable. Yes, the possibility was certainly there.

But then again...

If this was a test, it seemed to go well beyond what could ordinarily be expected of helpers in the medical office. For one thing, solving it required some knowledge of the language of the west—and of course, it had never been a given that the three young women would share the information from their snacks with each other. Someone was searching for people with the ability to consider multiple sides of a situation and adapt.

Almost like...

Almost like a spy.

If Jinshi had some part in this, then it was possible. What connection could there be, though? But go far enough, and—

Nope. I don't understand.

If that was the case, then they didn't have to report things willy-nilly. They could try to talk to Aylin, play it by ear. Yes, they could, but...

"I'm reporting it," Maomao said.

"You think I can't hear you two talking? What if it's a test?!" Yao demanded.

If it was a test, then she would fail; that was all. Maomao had already qualified as a medical assistant. She didn't expect they would take work away from her because of this. Frankly, she was already on more than her maximum tolerable dose of work.

"Please, don't worry. You're both welcome to talk to the consort."

And I'll be mixing up medicines in the medical office.

The two other young women could pass the test; they would be more than enough. There was no telling what they might be called on to do when and if they passed this additional test.

I'm not interested, Maomao thought. She was perfectly content to hang around the medical office, doing laundry or making tea or whatever other little chores were needed, having her old man and the other medical officers teach her new formulae. Maybe occasionally trying them out on some sturdy-looking soldier who came by. That was all she really wanted. A modest happiness, but enough for her.

The other two ladies, however, wore scary looks. They had a firm grip on Maomao and were glaring at her. Particularly Yao.

"We couldn't have solved this without the three of us together. If you go telling, she'll assume we agreed."

So what was she trying to say?

"You're in this with us!" Yao and En'en chorused.

All Maomao could do was hold up her hands a little and smile wryly.

Chapter 6: Strategist Down

Maomao sighed as she stood doing the laundry under the baking sun. This was really a huge pain. Not the laundry, no. The net she'd found herself caught in since Aylin had given them that riddle and they had solved it. All morning, Yao and En'en had been giving her the evil eye, making sure she didn't sell them out.

I'm in this too, huh...

That explained why En'en was smack next to her, her bucket right beside Maomao's. She was working industriously on some bandages, and because she'd thought ahead and gotten some soapberry pulp ready, the wrappings came clean nicely.

After the bandages were cleaned, they would be boiled. Blood could have toxins in it, and getting other people's blood on you or ingesting it could spread infection. Then there were sexually transmitted diseases, whose ravages Maomao was all too familiar with.

Yao was out with the medical officers; they were going to teach her how to shop for medicines.

I wanted to go on that trip, Maomao thought, but she had been left behind, along with En'en, who had felt Maomao shouldn't be left alone. It was terrifically boring. So boring that before long she found herself wanting to take it out on her companion.

"Here I thought laundry was maids' work," she said.

"I never once said such a thing," En'en replied, and it was true—it was the now-dismissed court ladies who had said it. Maomao wondered how they were getting along these days. Given that neither Yao nor En'en had looked particularly distressed by their departure, it seemed the ladies weren't so much old friends as sycophants who had been trying to ingratiate themselves with Yao when they heard about her family background. Unfortunately for them, Yao wasn't soft enough to stick her neck out for such fair-weather toadies.

"I wanted to go on the shopping trip," Maomao grumbled.

"So did I," En'en said. "For that matter, they could have just taken you, for all I care." In other words, she'd just wanted to be with Yao. It turned out neither of them was exactly happy, so Maomao resolved to stop

griping about it.

They were just wringing out the washed bandages and putting them in a bucket when several people came running into the medical office. Maomao squinted, trying to see what was happening, and saw they had someone on a stretcher.

“An injury?” Maomao asked as she and En’en went back to the office, carrying the buckets. With the real doctors out shopping, the apprentice physician was the only one watching the place, so they figured they’d better get back and see what was going on.

“Uh! Umm...” The apprentice physician was in a tizzy, lost for what to do. Given their proximity to the military camp, injured men were hardly uncommon here, and even the apprentice should have been more than comfortable with them by now. When Maomao worked her way into the gaggle of people and saw who was lying on the stretcher, however, she couldn’t refrain from a disgusted “Ugh!”

Who should she find but the monocled freak laid out on the stretcher, tossing with pain.

“They say he’s been poisoned,” the apprentice told her, his face pale.

“Unbelievable...” Reluctantly, Maomao took a look at the eccentric strategist. He was pale and shaking, holding his stomach. Which was fine as far as it went, until...

“I c-can’t hold it in...”

At that, needless to say, his stretcher bearers paled, then hefted him up and hurried him off to the toilet. Let us refrain from saying which end “it” came out of.

It came in waves for the next hour or so, until the strategist’s condition finally stabilized. Expelling so much had dried him out, though, so Maomao and the others gave him water with some salt and sugar mixed in to make it easier to absorb. For the record, it was the apprentice physician who administered the drink; Maomao only stood by and watched. She knew it might have been even easier for him to drink if they’d mixed it with a little juice, but she felt no obligation to go that far. At least he was able to get the water down. When it came to vomiting and diarrhea, staying hydrated was key.

When things had calmed down a bit, Maomao got out a pot, intending to boil the cleaned bandages, but she was interrupted when Lahan came rushing in.

“I received word that my honored father collapsed!” he said.

Maomao simply pointed to the room where the freak was sleeping. The crowd of his subordinates had dwindled to just one, left behind to keep an eye on him, and the apprentice had gone to call the doctors back. Maomao didn’t blame the guy for being a little disturbed, but she suspected it wasn’t a great idea to leave oversight of the all-important medical office to two court ladies.

En’en gave Maomao a funny look as she poured water into the pot. “Do you know him?”

“Unfortunately.”

“You seem to have some kind of connection to Grand Commandant Kan too. May I ask—”

“No relation.” Maomao pointedly began preparing the fire.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s all right,” En’en said, but there was something in her voice. She was asking—but she’d probably already looked into it herself.

It’s all that old bastard’s fault, Maomao thought. It would be a lot easier to play dumb about him if he wasn’t constantly lurking around their place of work.

Lahan returned from the sickroom when the bandages were boiling nicely. “I don’t see my granduncle,” he said.

“He’s shopping today. He probably won’t be back for another couple hours. And I think the rest of the doctors are at one of the other medical offices.”

“Hrm...”

Freak though the strategist might be, he was also a rather important person, and it might be best to keep his indisposition quiet. Notwithstanding his injuries, however, they’d probably brought him to the medical office in hopes of summoning Maomao’s old man, Luomen.

“They said something about him having been poisoned,” En’en ventured as Lahan stood with his arms crossed. Maomao realized how unusual it felt to see En’en taking the initiative like that.

“Yes, that’s right,” Lahan said. “But my honored father isn’t just anyone. Who could have managed to poison him?”

“Surely there are more than a few people with grudges against him,” Maomao said, her tone relatively polite. She could have gotten away with speaking less formally to Lahan, but with En’en standing right there, she decided to mind her words. Anyway, when someone climbed as high as

the strategist had, and done it in part by deposing his own father, there had to be as many grievances against him as there were stars in the sky.

"My father is an excellent judge of character, if nothing else. I don't believe he would leave someone in his orbit who would poison him."

"I agree with you. Take away his ability to judge people, and you're left with nothing but an old man starting to stink of age," Maomao said.

"How rude. He *can* play Go and Shogi, you know."

"Both of you are positively awful," En'en said calmly, stirring the contents of the pot with some chopsticks. She was pretty enough that Lahan clearly felt it was worth his while to talk to her. The way his glasses flashed, you could almost see him turning her body into a series of numbers. His gaze was growing dangerously perverted, so Maomao gave him a sound smack on the head.

"My apologies if this question rubs the wrong way coming from an outsider, but for my future reference, perhaps you might tell me what it was he was poisoned with?" En'en said.

"Good question," Maomao replied. "Everyone is using the word *poison*, but is it possible this is simply from bad food? Did he eat something he found on the ground?"

"I have a guard watching him at all times to make sure he doesn't," Lahan said proudly.

You do*?* Maomao thought.

"U-Um... Excuse me..."

They turned at the voice to find the soldier who had been stationed by the eccentric strategist. He was rather slim and looked somewhat retiring.

Rikuson was something of a pretty-boy too, Maomao recalled. Aide-de-camp to the strategist was a military position, but no doubt it involved a lot of paperwork. Now that she thought about it, she realized she'd hardly seen Rikuson recently. Had he been prized away from the strategist?

"I wrote down what you asked for," the soldier said. He handed them a ratty piece of paper, some of the characters smudged and indistinct. They spelled out what the freak had been doing and what he'd eaten over the last several days.

"Let's see. Immediately before the incident he was... Ahem. Well, I feel sorry for the Moon Prince. It seems my honored father was intruding on him again," Lahan said.

In other words, immediately before falling ill, the freak had been bothering Jinshi. It sometimes seemed like that weirdo didn't even *have* a

job, except when it seemed like he did. Occasionally, he would put his stamp on some important paperwork, or make a snap personnel decision. He might be useful if a war broke out, but in peacetime he was less helpful than a lantern at midday. While it was one thing to be useless, he had to go bothering everyone else.

"This says he ate one mooncake and drank some juice, and that he offered the mooncake to the Moon Prince. It also says he was angry that he wasn't offered tea."

"That's right. The prince was as lovely as ever, if I may say so," the strategist's assistant replied, his eyes glistening at the memory. Another of Jinshi's victims.

Anyway, someone might try to poison Jinshi, but Maomao didn't think Jinshi would try to poison anyone else.

"Maomao, how much poison are we likely to be talking about here?" Lahan asked.

"There's no single answer. It depends on the poison. Also, with some poisons the victim can appear to get better, only for the effects to recur later and cause death." She glanced toward the sickroom. The aide's face was pale. "Although I think he'll be fine," she added.

"Your bedside manner leaves something to be desired," Lahan growled. He put the piece of paper on the table. Before he'd visited Jinshi, the strategist had apparently been lazing around at an open-air pavilion in one of the palace gardens. With its cool breezes and the river flowing by, it was apparently one of his favorite spots. He'd brought along a snack, a steamed bun, which he'd been eating.

"Wage thief," Maomao grumbled.

"This might be a good moment to *not* say everything we think," En'en chided, but privately Maomao was sure she agreed with her. The freak had arrived thirty minutes late for work in the morning, truly the kind of privilege afforded only to the bosses. For breakfast he'd had congee with sweet potato mixed in and a mooncake.

"It's all sweets," En'en remarked.

"He's going to get diabetes," Maomao said.

"My honored granduncle told him the same thing," Lahan replied. "Incidentally, Maomao, any ideas yet?" He was looking closely at her. He would normally have turned to her father, but since he wasn't here, Lahan was left with no choice but Maomao. No doubt the attempted poisoning of a military official was a case they wanted solved as quickly as possible.

“If there’s anything left of the food he was eating, I might be able to figure something out,” she said.

“I’m afraid not. He ate all of it.”

“U-Um,” the aide once again volunteered weakly. “There’s still a few sips of the juice he was drinking...”

“Can you bring it here? Right away?” Maomao asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The aide left the room but was soon back; it took him exactly as long as it took the boiled bandages to dry.

“Here it is,” he said. He gave her a glass drinking vessel with a wooden stopper, about one-third full of a pale liquid. The coloration implied grape juice, diluted with water to make it more drinkable.

“That’s quite large,” En’en said, looking at the vessel with interest. It couldn’t have been easy to carry it around all the time, but since the freak always drank juice instead of water or tea, he probably needed it.

“I don’t believe it’s poisoned,” the aide said.

“What makes you say that?” Maomao asked.

“Because I had some too. Anyway, I should think it would be extremely difficult to slip poison into a container that never leaves his side.”

“Then I guess we can ignore this,” Lahan said, taking the bottle and placing it on the table.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” En’en said.

“Not as beautiful as you,” Lahan replied smoothly. Stupid abacus-face. He was no looker himself, but he never failed to chat up a pretty girl.

En’en only said “Thank you” and smiled courteously. Purely businesslike. It was patently obvious that she had no interest whatsoever in the tousle-haired man.

Maomao, meanwhile, studied the glass bottle, observing the liquid inside. “Hm?” She cocked her head. “This really is quite an impressive piece.”

“I agree, ma’am. I believe Master Rikuson gave it to him. He’s quite fond of it.”

“Speaking of Master Rikuson, I haven’t seen him lately. Whatever happened to him?” The perfect chance to ask the question that had been on her mind.

“Ah. He went to the western capital. This bottle was his parting gift to the strategist. I’m his successor, and I must say, he left big shoes to fill.”

The aide bowed his head.

"You didn't know?" Lahan said.

"I certainly didn't." She and Rikuson had both been in the western capital only recently. And now he'd gone back?

"With Master Gyokuen coming to the capital, he requested that someone knowledgeable about matters in the central regions be sent west in his place. Master Rikuson has gone to fulfill that request," the aide said.

Gyokuen: the father of Empress Gyokuyou. As father of the Empress, he might well be expected to come to the national center. Maomao thought it seemed a bit sudden, but then, she'd heard that Empress Gyokuyou's son —which was to say, Gyokuen's grandson and, if things remained as they were, the future emperor—would be formally presented soon.

The Crown Prince's presentation would be a lavish affair, with even VIPs from other nations present, so Gyokuen could hardly fail to attend, even if he was the most powerful person in the western capital, and even if it was a very long trip.

"He insisted, and I'm afraid we were in no position to turn him down," Lahan said. "And he was so useful..." Lahan knew Rikuson well and was clearly distressed by his loss. The strategist's erstwhile aide was able to remember any face he saw even once, which certainly made him an excellent counterpart to the freak himself, who couldn't even tell one face from another.

En'en probably couldn't follow even half of the conversation, but she was listening without too much interest anyway. She seemed like she could be an excellent lady-in-waiting, for she knew how to keep to herself at the right moments—but then again, it was intimidating when you couldn't be sure how much of the conversation she actually understood.

"All right, let's get back on topic. As far as who poisoned the strategist..." Lahan said.

"Oh, I've already figured that out," Maomao said offhandedly, her gaze still on the bottle.

"What?" exclaimed all three of the others at once.

"Well, who in the world was it?" Lahan demanded, adjusting his glasses on his face.

"The freak himself," Maomao replied. She flicked the bottle with the tip of her finger; it produced a delicate *ring* and the juice inside rippled.

"You're out of your mind. I think I can say for a fact that my honored father would never attempt suicide. Even if he might drive others to it."

“*Awful*,” En’en interjected.

“Nonetheless, he put it here himself—right in this juice,” Maomao said.

“H-Hold on a second. It didn’t look like there was anything in it. Did he put something in there when I wasn’t looking?” the aide said.

“Oh, he put something in it, all right. And he did it right in front of your eyes.” Maomao pointed to the mouth of the bottle, which was closed with the wooden stopper. “Question: I know he always keeps his juice with him, but does he usually have a cup, as well?”

“No, he just drinks straight from the bottle.”

“Did you do the same, drinking directly from it?”

“Absolutely not! When I escorted him back to his mansion last night, we bought the juice on the way home. That’s when he gave me some.” People frequently purchased drinks using their own containers. The strategist had probably washed an empty bottle, then had it filled with juice.

“So you bought this yesterday, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Now she was certain: the strategist had poisoned himself.

“So? What kind of poison did he use? If this is your idea of a joke, then let your dear big brother inform you that it’s gone too far,” Lahan said.

“Who’s my big brother?” Maomao growled, temporarily forgetting to be polite. She stole a look at En’en, who was making an *I-knew-it* face. She really must have checked Maomao out. Maomao cleared her throat and regained her composure. “It’s the same poison we all carry with us. Right here,” she said, and pointed at her mouth. Or more specifically, at what was inside it. “Saliva.”

“Saliva?”

If the strategist wasn’t drinking from a cup, then he was drinking directly from the bottle, and some of his saliva would get mixed back into the juice.

“What could possibly be poisonous about saliva?” Lahan said.

“You know how if a dog bites your hand and you let it go untreated, your hand will swell up? It’s the same thing. Canine and human saliva aren’t quite identical, but both can be poisonous.” And if the poison had nutrients to feed on, it would multiply. “If he’s lounging around an open-air pavilion on a warm night, carrying that juice everywhere without ever cooling it down, then the poison inside is going to grow, until it gets bad enough to be harmful.”

The glass bottle seemed likely to be especially good at retaining heat. Maomao had once used a goldfish bowl to focus the light of the sun, and she suspected this bottle could do something very similar.

"People know that fish will rot if you leave it out, but for some reason they never imagine that a drink might go bad in as little as half a day. But it does. And then you get..." She gestured in the direction of the indisposed strategist. "...a lot of trouble."

"Trouble, yes..." Lahan crossed his arms, wondering how he was going to explain this one.

"Should we simply say he ate something he found lying around? It seems easier to believe," the aide said—sounding reluctant, for his suggestion would certainly not help the strategist's authority.

"No, when it comes out that the contents of the bottle were poisoned, the situation will explain itself. Maomao, taste the juice for poison. I know that's your specialty," Lahan said.

"Absolutely not."

"Why not? Normally you can hardly stop yourself from sampling a poison."

"Because I'm not drinking from something that old fart put his mouth on. Do *you* want to try it?"

Lahan didn't say anything for a moment, but his expression was one of utter comprehension. At length he said, "Couldn't you be just a little kinder to him? He is still grieving, you know."

"I wouldn't want it to go to his head," Maomao said flatly.

The entire incident had been an all-around pain in the neck.

Not long after, the medical officers got back.

"My goodness, really?" Maomao's old man asked in exasperation when he heard the story. En'en, meanwhile, looked dejected; Yao was filling out paperwork regarding their purchases and wouldn't be back for a while yet.

The freak strategist had seemed basically fine, so Maomao had sent him home. Specifically, she'd had him carted away while he was still asleep, lest he wake up and cause even more headaches.

At least the medical officers were back, but now she found herself tasked with sorting and organizing the medicine they'd bought. Maomao enjoyed the work, but after the day's events she was awfully tired.

"Talk about exhausting," En'en said to her.

"Yeah," Maomao replied. En'en had seemed unusually willing to talk

to her that day, maybe thanks to Yao's absence. She was fundamentally reticent and not very expressive, so she'd never actually come after Maomao herself, who realized now that En'en didn't necessarily dislike her. It was just that with Yao around, she probably didn't talk much for the same reason Maomao didn't.

Because talking is a lot of trouble.

She was probably a lot like Maomao, actually.

"I think I should apologize for some of what's happened so far," En'en said as she organized some medicine in a drawer.

"What do you mean?" Maomao said.

"The way I've been acting. I know I haven't been terribly nice to you. As for Lady Yao... Well, I can only ask you to be generous with her. She was so sure she would enter this job as the top student, but here you are."

"Top student?"

"Hadn't you heard? The person who gets the best grade on the test is given a slightly different color of hairband."

"Ah." Maomao remembered how her hairband alone had been a darker color. *No, I hadn't heard...*

She'd left the matter of her outfit entirely to Gaoshun, and when he'd brought her a change of clothes there had been too much badgering on the part of the madam to leave time for explanations. She felt a bit bad about it now, but she was also surprised. She'd figured she had only barely passed the test.

"Setting aside the general-education portion of the test, when it comes to the specialized knowledge, getting even half the questions right is considered good," En'en said.

General education? Did that refer to the history and poetry Maomao had choked down so unwillingly? She'd wrung herself out for those questions. Oh, how she had worked!

"Lady Yao swore she got all of the general questions right, so she must have lost out to you in the specialized-knowledge portion. I was confident my grade was as good as anyone's, too, so I admit that at first I wondered if you'd been hired because of your family connections."

"Is that what this was all about?" Maomao said. Her only regret was that if she'd really done so well, it meant she could have afforded to study a little less. Not that it would have made much difference; from the moment she'd been sold out to the old lady, she'd been left without a choice. "I'm an apothecary by vocation, you see..."

“Yes, I know. You proved it today. But I don’t think that will take the sting out of it for Lady Yao.”

Maomao could understand, and she didn’t necessarily have a problem with people like that. She certainly liked it much better than if Yao had tried to suck up to her instead. The problem was that it was all too easy for other people to misinterpret such aloofness. Because Yao was from the best family of any of the newly minted court ladies, the others had felt obliged to follow her.

“She’s not a bad person,” En’en said. “I hope you won’t hold this against her.” En’en’s handling of the situation was downright adult. Maomao hadn’t asked how old she was, but she suspected they were about the same age. En’en added, “Lady Yao is just fifteen. She still has some growing up to do.”

“Did you say fifteen?” That made her four years younger than Maomao —yet her body was so developed! “She’s quite large for her age.” (Maomao didn’t specify where.)

“Yes, I’ve worked hard to help her grow,” En’en replied, sounding strangely proud of the fact.

If she’s just fifteen, then I guess I can hardly blame her, Maomao thought, although she suspected that if she said out loud that Yao was still a bit childish, En’en would get upset.

All this still left one issue. Namely, En’en was obviously Yao’s attendant, yet she was also quite intelligent in her own right, as evidenced by the fact that she knew a smattering of the western tongue, which even Yao didn’t speak.

“May I ask you something?” Maomao said.

“Yes? What?”

“If I hadn’t been here, Lady Yao still wouldn’t have been the top examinee, would she? You would have.”

A fixed smile came over En’en’s face. As she was putting away the next medicine in the drawer, she said, “Such a thing would *absolutely* never have happened.”

Absolutely, huh?

Cheating in order to raise one’s grade was a problem, but deliberately missing questions you knew the answers to? That wasn’t even cheating.

En’en was polite and circumspect, but Maomao saw she had to stay on her toes around her. She was one shrewd young woman.

Chapter 7: Aylin’s Intentions

About every ten days one of the physicians from the outside, principally Maomao’s father, would visit the rear palace. The system was simple enough. Upper consorts were seen once a month, while middle and lower consorts received exams every three months. Even this made seeing everyone something of a challenge, but if Luomen was ordered to do it, then he would have to do it.

It had been nine days since their last visit to the rear palace. Nine perfectly normal days for Maomao, other than the two court ladies keeping a constant eye on her.

If there was a problem, it was that any letters that came to her were examined. Thankfully, none of them arrived from Jinshi personally; they usually came in Gaoshun’s name. Also (not that it mattered to her), it seemed Basen was back at work. His recovery struck her as preternaturally quick, considering the severity of his wounds.

Maybe he’s just built differently. One day, she hoped she would be able to test his powers of recovery against those of other people.

A letter came from Sazen letting her know that the apothecary shop was doing just fine, although he also complained that Kokuyou was obnoxious. Yes, Maomao knew he could be obnoxiously cheerful, but Sazen would just have to live with it.

Once in a while, pictures of Maomao the cat were mixed in with the letters; these came from Chou-u. In lieu of a personal seal, Maomao’s toe beans would be pressed on the pictures in scarlet ink. The scratches on the pictures suggested she signed them under duress.

In the name of careful inspection, Yao studied one picture of the cat particularly hard. At length, she handed it regretfully back to Maomao. En’en later asked if Maomao wouldn’t give her the cat painting; Maomao suspected it would then make its way to Yao.

Yao and En’en seemed to think the “pale woman” was just a code name. It seemed to nag at En’en, but Yao didn’t pay it much mind, so En’en didn’t pursue the matter too far.

The pale woman... Maomao was almost certain it was the same person she knew as the White Lady, although she couldn’t be absolutely sure.

If it's not... She thought of the painter she'd saved from food poisoning. His house had had a painting of a beautiful woman with white hair and red eyes, someone he claimed to have seen in the western reaches. Could that be the woman that Aylin, who herself hailed from Shaoh, was referring to?

But why the riddle, then? No, it had to be the White Lady, Maomao thought, shaking her head. Yet still the woman in the painting wouldn't leave her mind. *Could there be some sort of connection?*

Her question would be answered the very next day, when they saw Aylin again.

There were not quite a hundred women in the rear palace with the rank of consort. Rumors always swirled whenever an upper consort left the rear palace, but lower-ranking consorts often departed without anyone remarking on it. Sometimes they were given in marriage to deserving officials, or returned to their families, never having been visited by the Emperor. Many of the palace women scoffed at the idea of leaving the rear palace, but it didn't particularly bother Maomao.

Maomao, Yao, and En'en were with Luomen and the quack doctor, making the rounds of the rear palace. This was their second time on this duty. They found the room with the flower and number indicated by their tag. It belonged to a lower consort, but the door had a black cloth over it, a sign of loss indicating that the owner of the chamber had died.

"Do you suppose she was ill?" Yao asked. But this was one of the women Maomao's father had seen on their last visit, and he hadn't noticed anything. Which implied...

"Suicide, I suspect," Maomao said. It wasn't that unusual. As long as the death was obviously self-inflicted, with no signs of foul play, the rear palace hardly batted an eye. It wasn't exactly an everyday occurrence, but it was nothing to get excited over.

The ladies in the rear palace might represent every different kind of "flower," but most of them arrived convinced of their own beauty. Many had an awfully high regard for themselves, and more than a few were driven to despair by the gulf between their expectations of the rear palace and the reality.

The group heard some ladies chattering: "They say she was addicted to alcohol." They were so caught up in their gossip that they didn't notice the gaggle of medical personnel standing right nearby. As soon as they spotted the white overcoats, they scurried back to their posts.

It truly is a graveyard of women... Or rather, a battlefield, Maomao thought. Those who were defeated in combat had no choice but to disappear. On some level, the maids could be said to be freer than the consorts. They might be worked like dogs, but they had a fixed term of service. If they could just hold out long enough, they would get outside the palace walls again.

Today's plan was to visit the lower consorts' chambers, then lastly head to Aylin's residence. They hadn't initially planned to see her, as they had visited her last time, but the plan had been changed because of a personal request from the lady herself. Was she not feeling well? Or was there something else she wanted to know?

First, they came to the room of a lower consort with a camellia symbol on the door.

"No, no particular problems," said the consort, who reeked of perfume, as one of her ladies fanned her. The bountiful odor came drifting toward them, making Maomao want to scrunch up her nose. It was summer, yet amazingly, the room was shut tight, giving the smell nowhere to go.

Too bad for her. She has His Majesty's preferred body type. Even under the consort's robe, the collar of which was fastidiously closed, it was clear she was voluptuous. Her facial features gave her a somewhat aggressive look, but she seemed intelligent enough. Very much within the scope of their ever-energetic Emperor's interests.

Maomao stole a glance at the quack's notebook. It was open to a page with the name of the odiferous concubine before them, along with notes about illnesses she'd suffered in the past—not to mention how many visits she'd had from His Majesty.

I was right. She is *his type.*

Only one such visit was recorded. She suspected it was the thick smell of perfume that had kept him from coming back for more. The odor seemed to be something imported. It was a shame, really: a touch of it behind her ears might have been quite pleasant.

It might seem startlingly frank, even uncouth, but in the rear palace records were always kept of the Emperor's nocturnal visits, which were required to be reported to the physician. But being required didn't make it any less trying sometimes. *Like for Empress Gyokuyou*. His Majesty had sometimes visited the Jade Pavilion every third night. It wasn't just for show—oh, it *definitely* wasn't—but someone had to be posted outside the

bedroom just to make sure. The duty usually fell to Hongniang, Gyokuyou's chief lady-in-waiting, but when His Majesty came on consecutive nights or the job otherwise grew too demanding, Maomao had sometimes taken up the post.

I had the advantage of being used to this stuff from the pleasure district...

From what Maomao could deduce, the Emperor and Gyokuyou were engaged in some pretty advanced hanky-panky. Just the noises that could be heard through the wall... For Hongniang, more than thirty years old and still single, it must have been a trial.

The simple fact that they kept a tally of such things was enough to prove that you weren't in the outside world. Maomao suspected that visits to this lower consort wouldn't resume at this point, but the one visit she'd had appeared to have left this woman imperious and proud, though in Maomao's eyes it only made her seem the more sad. That lone visit put the world beyond the inner palace all but out of her reach.

Maybe if it weren't for this stink... It was so overdone, Maomao wondered if there was something wrong with the woman's nose. In fact, it seemed there might be: the consort's small, shapely lips kept opening; it seemed less like a tic and more like she was breathing through her mouth.

Living creatures normally breathe through their noses, like dogs and cats do—and, normally, humans. If she was breathing through her mouth, it might suggest that her nose was blocked, and if she'd had that habit since she was a child, it would have affected the alignment of her teeth.

The alignment of her teeth... Maomao mused. Her old man was just checking the woman's mouth, evidently having had the same thought, but the woman's teeth were more or less straight.

"Do you sneeze often?" Luomen inquired.

"I do."

"Any stuffiness in the nose?"

"Frequently, especially from spring to early summer. And especially since coming to the rear palace."

"Do you have trouble sleeping?"

"I could sleep just fine, if only my nose weren't blocked up."

Luomen scribbled some notes. The quack was simply standing and watching, so Maomao took it upon herself to grab the portable medicine chest and give it to her father. He took out something for nasal inflammation. "Try using this. Stop if it gives you trouble sleeping. You

may also find yourself urinating more frequently, but I don't think that should be an issue." Then he added, "I think the perfume you're currently using may not agree with you physically. If you must use it, use just a little, or consider switching to a different kind."

"All right," the consort said. Maybe her meekness was inspired by gratitude that he had understood about her nose.

Maomao knew that if she noticed something, her old man could hardly fail to do the same. What was more, he'd managed to tell the consort that her perfume was too heavy in the gentlest possible way. Though if he hadn't, when her nose got better, it would probably have dawned on her just how badly she'd overdone it.

Once they left the consort's room, Luomen began inspecting the garden, where there were colorful summer flowers everywhere. "Where did this consort come from, I wonder," he said.

The quack flipped through his notebook. "She's from far to the northwest, close to the desert. Oh, the climate there must be very unpleasant."

Maomao's old man turned slowly toward her and the other two assistants. "Well, let's make this a teaching moment, shall we? What do you think caused the lady's rhinitis?" His riddle was accompanied by a gentle smile. Maomao's hand was in the process of shooting up when she saw him give her a bit of a look, and she put it back down. He wasn't asking her so much as Yao and En'en.

Slowly, Yao put up her hand. "Is it because her room was so stuffy?" It was certainly true that her chamber was closed up tight; that was one reason the smell refused to dissipate.

It won't have helped, Maomao thought. The room had looked clean enough, but it didn't seem like the consort was getting much fresh air in her living quarters. And they hadn't seen her bedroom; there was always the chance it was dusty in there.

"It's also possible her room is unsanitary," Yao went on. "If her sleeping area was dirty, it could breed bugs that harmed her body."

It was possible, but Maomao didn't think that was what was going on. *That consort didn't look like a woman who had given up on attracting His Majesty's notice.* If she was hoping for an Imperial visit, she wouldn't fail to keep the bedchamber clean and ready. Even her overdone perfume was, as far as it went, an attempt to doll herself up. She just hadn't known when

to stop thanks to her stuffy nose.

Maomao observed the grasses and trees growing in the garden. *She said the inflammation was worst from spring into early summer.* She crouched down, plucking some grass growing by the edge of the path. Mugwort. Maomao knew it well; she often used it in moxibustion treatments. It was a perfectly ordinary plant around here—but not, she suspected, where the consort had come from.

As Maomao crouched there looking nonplussed, her father took the mugwort from her like she was being a little brat.

He said, “I’m sure the consort’s bedroom is in good order. No doubt she keeps it that way so it will be ready anytime His Majesty might see fit to visit her. Particularly given that she has in fact had one such visit.”

Yao looked put out to be told (if not in so many words) that she’d given the wrong answer.

Luomen, however, knew how to soothe a wounded ego. “You were focusing on the right things. Illness often follows from a lack of sanitation, especially in bedrooms.”

Now Yao seemed conflicted: praise, good, but...praise from a eunuch...good?

I would have gotten the right answer, Maomao thought. Call it something less than mature—Yao was younger than her, after all—but Maomao’s adoptive father was one of the few people whose approval she craved.

“However, sneezing can also be caused by grass and flowers like these,” Luomen went on. It wasn’t the same as having a cold; plant pollen and spores could get into the body and cause fits of sneezing or seemingly unstoppable floods of snot. “Pollen can wreak havoc in the body. Hence the sneezing.”

It was unusual for Luomen to state the facts quite so plainly when he was dealing with Maomao. It was enough to make her wonder if there was something else going on with the woman. But, no: the straightforward approach was probably easiest for Yao and En’en; even the quack was looking at Luomen with undisguised admiration.

You’re supposed to be one of the teachers! Maomao thought at him.

Yao’s hand slowly went up again. “Um... If pollen ‘wreaks havoc’ on the body, why aren’t we all sneezing?” she asked.

Luomen smiled. “A good question. Just as there are those who catch colds more easily than others, there are those whose bodies aren’t affected

by pollen. It's also possible to find your body is suddenly affected when it wasn't before. For example, if you're already in ill health from something else. A long journey from a far country to an unfamiliar land, for example."

Rather like their consort.

I knew all that, Maomao pouted. Her father looked at her apologetically. Physicians were supposed to hand down cryptic pronouncements from which students had to unravel the truth for themselves, but Maomao's father didn't work like that. He was kind enough to explain things so that anyone could understand.

It still stung a little, but Maomao could act adult, too, even if she didn't always like it. She forced herself to assume a neutral expression once more as they went to the next consort's residence.

After they had seen ten or so of the other consorts, they finally came back to Aylin. Maomao found it challenging, somehow, to think of her as "Consort Aylin." Not because she was a foreigner. (If that were the case, she would surely have faced a similar difficulty with Empress Gyokuyou.) No, Maomao had trouble with Aylin's title for one simple reason: she didn't believe Aylin had really come to the rear palace as a consort.

A lady-in-waiting opened the door for them, exactly as a lady-in-waiting should, and they were shown to the same room as last time. Just before they entered, Maomao felt En'en tug on her sleeve. *Yes, yes, I know,* she thought. Maomao was a coconspirator, but Yao would play the part of the ringleader. Maomao thought En'en would be better at thinking on her feet, but that wasn't how things worked around here. En'en's role was to support Yao.

The first question was when to broach the subject. Aylin's face was red and feverish; Maomao had no idea if it was an act or a real condition, but it certainly helped explain why she had specifically asked for them, and the flush gave her face a striking beauty of its own.

God, her chest is big, Maomao thought.

Being in ill health, the consort was wearing what amounted to sleepwear. One of her ladies looked like she wanted to object about the propriety. Maomao spotted En'en discreetly comparing Aylin's chest with Yao's, but she could keep that to herself. Was En'en hoping to help Yao "grow" even more?

"I'll take your pulse, then," Luomen said politely. However ravishing

the consort might look, the men here lacked the *means* to respond. Anyway, they were an old man and an older man, their libidos already long withered.

Luomen considered the woman's symptoms and then prepared a medicine: she complained of some stiffness in her neck, so he made a concoction of arrowroot. "You just have a cold," he said. "The unfamiliar environment here must be stressful."

"Thank you very much. I was thinking after your last visit, I'm glad to discover that the *phys*-icians here use more than chants and charms." Aylin wore a look of wonderment.

"Some doctors do practice that sort of medicine. It simply happens that I don't," Luomen said, refusing to specifically denigrate folk practices like "chants and charms."

"Of course, there must be some."

"If you'd prefer magical practices, I can certainly bring someone who specializes in them."

Aylin shook her head. "No; in fact, I've been very pleased not to encounter any such. I once served as an apprentice shrine maiden, you know, and I would rather not find myself subjected to the rituals of another faith."

"Ah, I hadn't realized. Yes, if you follow the 'shrine maiden's faith,' that's certainly understandable."

The Emperor was not cruel enough to make his women abandon their beliefs when they entered the rear palace. As long as they practiced their individual religions discreetly, he was willing to look the other way.

She abandoned her country—

But it seemed faith could not be put aside so easily.

"I'm familiar with the shrine maiden-ism of Shaoh. What will do you do during rites here?" Luomen asked, referring to the sacred observances sometimes held in the rear palace.

"It is no problem. As long as I receive *per*-mission to take part, I will follow the ways of my new home."

A very flexible response, then.

Yao fidgeted as she listened to the conversation, clearly feeling she was missing her chance to talk to the consort. As it was, it seemed it might be best not to try to talk to her at all.

The mark of a good subordinate, however, is the ability to come to the rescue at such moments. The medical examination was interrupted by a

distinct *crack*: the sound of En'en (ever expressionless) biting into one of the lightly toasted rice crackers that had been put on the table along with the tea.

"En'en!" Yao exclaimed. Since she had spoken up, there was no need for Luomen or the quack to intervene—but Maomao knew En'en would never normally do something so impolite.

"My sincere apologies. They simply looked so enticing," En'en said.

"Do not worry. That is *why* they are there," Aylin said, still looking languid.

At that, En'en glanced at Yao as if to say this was what she had been waiting for. It was only then that Yao finally seemed to realize what the other woman was doing. "Why yes, they do look delicious," she said. "Almost as good as those treats you gave us the last time we saw you. They were most unusual, those pale-colored cookies."

The cookies had indeed been a strange shape, but they hadn't been pale. Yao was trying to communicate that they had cracked the code.

Aylin's expression didn't change, although some of the ladies-in-waiting looked perplexed. Perhaps they hadn't known about the papers in the cookies, or perhaps they'd been told they were simple fortunes.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed them. Baking treats happens to be a hobby of mine. I made more for today. I do hope you'll take them with you," Aylin said, a slight smile crossing her face. The smile didn't reveal whether or not she had understood Yao's meaning—but the young women couldn't wait to find out what kinds of snacks the consort would give them this time.

The treats Aylin gave them on this occasion contained no puzzles, as the three medical assistants confirmed when they got together to see what they had after their work in the rear palace was over. Instead the treats contained a letter, telling them to go to a restaurant near the dormitory. The fact that the same letter was in all three of their cookies suggested that they had been right to think they needed to pass the test together or not at all.

Many of the establishments in the northern part of the capital city were luxurious places, and the location named in the letters was a fancy drinking establishment. A lot of government bureaucrats spent time there, so there were plenty of private rooms available.

"Is it just me, or do we look out of place here?" Yao said. This was,

again, a *drinking* establishment—a very fancy one—and despite her family's wealth, it wasn't the sort of place Yao, at just fifteen, was very familiar with.

It also wasn't the sort of place three women usually went alone. Most of the patrons were men, the waitresses the only women in sight. The average person would probably have advised the girls to keep their distance, although Maomao, well acquainted with drinking and drunkards from the pleasure district, was unbothered by the cold looks their party received. At least no one seemed too drunk to think straight.

They were greeted by a waitress in fancy makeup. "Can I help you?" she asked, polite but obviously not regarding them as potential customers. Maybe she thought they were there to look for a job.

"We're customers from the west," Maomao said, exactly as the letters had instructed. The waitress took the hint and led them inside.

No sooner were they settled in their private room than Maomao felt herself go limp as the tension left her body.

"Hullo," said a small, tousle-haired, spectacles-wearing man sipping some fruit liquor—no, more likely fruit juice. It was the freak strategist's nephew and adopted son, Lahan. There was another man there as well, someone Lahan occasionally brought along as a bodyguard, but Maomao had never known him to say a word and figured it was safe to ignore him.

"Why, you're—"

"Do you know this man?"

En'en had met Lahan when the strategist had collapsed the other day, but Yao had been away from the medical office at the time and didn't know who he was.

"I'm so glad you made it here safely. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come," Lahan said.

"I'm going home," Maomao said, spinning on her heel.

Yao grabbed her arm. "Why are you going home? Do you know him too?" The question mark was practically visible over her head as she looked from Maomao to Lahan and back.

"This is Master Lahan," En'en offered. "Maomao is Grand Commandant Kan's daughter, you see."

The freak strategist's full title! She really had done her homework, Maomao realized, scowling bitterly. She resorted to her usual insistence: "He's a stranger."

Meanwhile, Lahan seemed entirely unbothered. “I’m impressed you know that,” he said to En’en with genuine admiration.

“I would naturally investigate anyone who insisted on hanging around so often. Even if there does appear to be a certain tacit approval of his actions.”

Damn freak! Maomao cursed the strategist silently. He was only ever a nuisance. She’d heard that since he’d managed to give himself food poisoning, his subordinates had been watching him closely at every meal.

“And this man is the Grand Commandant’s son,” En’en said.

“So he’s your older brother?” Yao said, giving Maomao a curious look.

“That’s right,” Lahan said.

“That’s absolutely wrong,” Maomao said.

“Which is it?!” Yao said. Maomao was bent on keeping Yao, at least, out of Lahan’s web. But the other woman went on, “So you’ve had someone on the inside all along.” She was under a misunderstanding, but not the one Maomao had feared. And who could blame her, when she found out that an acquaintance of Maomao’s was the ringleader?

It was Lahan who intervened. “Now *that* is wrong. We have no use for anyone who can’t solve a riddle as simple as that one, even if I am related to them. After all, if we sent someone without a working brain into this situation, it would only make things more dangerous for everyone.” He squinted his already fox-like eyes behind his large, round spectacles.

Maomao knew he wasn’t simply standing up for her; it was what he really thought. This was the man who had betrayed his own family and chased them out of their house. This was Lahan.

There was a crook to En’en’s lips; Maomao thought it was a smile, but if so, it was a distinctly sarcastic one. Maybe she’d heard rumors about Lahan, what kind of person he was. She certainly seemed more wise to the ways of the world than Yao, who was still cocking her head in confusion.

Maybe she has to be so she can help her more-sheltered mistress...

She was the right woman for the job, then.

“But why stand around to talk when we can do it while we eat? Sit, sit, and let’s have a pleasant meal.”

Maomao, still openly upset, took a seat. By dint of his social standing, the meal was presumably Lahan’s treat. She would take the opportunity to order the most expensive thing on the menu.

“So there you have it,” Lahan said, and although his tone was light, the

content of his explanation sounded very troublesome indeed. It certainly warranted reserving a private VIP room at a lavish restaurant. What he'd said couldn't go beyond these walls.

In outline, the story went something like this: Lahan had been involved in getting Aylin into the rear palace. That much, Maomao had known. Aylin claimed a political enemy of hers was making a bid for power and that she was in danger of her life. Her request for Li to export food to Shaoh had been, after a fashion, an attempt to give herself a lifeline: in times of famine, having a ready supply of food could make you powerful. She had probably hoped that would be a major card for her to play.

"But ultimately, even that didn't faze her enemies," Lahan said. The populace could be frightening if angered, but no weapon was powerful enough if you were assassinated before you could use it. So instead, Aylin had elected to enter Li's rear palace. As such, outwardly, Li wasn't offering her political asylum; in fact, it could even appear to be strengthening its bonds with a neighboring nation.

Maomao looked puzzled.

"Question?" Lahan asked.

"No, just thinking that women seem to do exceptionally well for themselves in Shaoh."

A situation like Aylin's would be almost unthinkable in Li, simply because outside the rear palace itself, a woman couldn't hope to rise higher in the hierarchy than a man. Even serving as a court lady was, in most cases, ultimately undertaken in order to make oneself a more attractive bride. Women might be important tools for their use in political marriages, true enough, but rarely would they have the influence that Aylin seemed to.

"What, didn't you know that?" Yao chuckled, sounding pleased to know something Maomao didn't for once. She was obviously itching to explain. Maomao was increasingly starting to see the charm in her personality. "The country of Shaoh is supported by two pillars," Yao said. "One is the king, and the other is the shrine maiden."

Maomao had heard tell of Shaoh's shrine maiden, at least a little bit. Her prognostications could influence the country's politics, and that was what the faith sometimes called "shrine maiden-ism" consisted of.

"That's right. You know your stuff," Lahan said. Yao and En'en were both pretty young ladies, and he was no doubt happy to be talking to them.

"Traditionally, the king has the final word in political matters, because

the shrine maiden has always been a young woman, mostly an image or symbol. But in recent years that's changed," Yao said. In the past, shrine maidens had rarely served more than a few years—maybe a decade at most—for by definition, only a girl who hadn't begun to menstruate could serve as shrine maiden. "The current shrine maiden, however, is in her forties now, older than the king, which means she can stick her nose where a shrine maiden wouldn't have dared before. In fact, it's made women all over Shaoh more politically influential."

"I see," Maomao said. Again, she'd already known parts of this story, but this put everything in a new light.

Forty years old and still her menarche hasn't begun? That definitely got Maomao's attention. It was very unusual, but not unheard of; it could be caused by a number of things. Maomao didn't know how the shrine maiden felt about the situation, but as for her, she was intensely interested. "Has that ever happened before?" she asked.

"The answer to that question bears directly on why we're here, so let me pick up the story there," Lahan said, munching on a thin-sliced pig's ear. "There have been cases in the past. When their visitor fails to arrive, however, the next shrine maiden has always been appointed after the current one turns twenty."

That made sense from both a political and a symbolic perspective. "So how has the current shrine maiden managed to stay in office so long?" Maomao asked.

"She's special."

Lahan took a piece of paper from the folds of his robe. It looked like a classical painting of a beautiful woman, except that the hair seemed to be only sketched in. It resembled the picture the artist had drawn of the woman with white hair and red eyes.

"The current shrine maiden is albino. There are several conditions governing which children might be chosen to be shrine maidens, but the most revered candidates of all are 'pale' children."

An albino: rare even among shrine maidens. So venerated that she could still occupy her position in spite of all precedent. Maomao didn't say anything, but the dots finally connected for her.

Do you want to know the truth of the pale woman?

She thought of the painting of the pale beauty the artist had encountered in the west. Could she have been this shrine maiden? She would have been just the right age at the time.

Albino people were said to lack whatever it was that would ordinarily have given their skin color. Sometimes “pale” children were born through sheer chance, but some bloodlines were more prone to producing them than others. Although they were supposed to be as rare in Shaoh as they were in Li.

“The shrine maiden is currently indisposed with an illness,” Lahan said. “She’s come to our country for medical treatment, but no man, not even a eunuch, is allowed to lay hands on her.”

“Hence court ladies serving as medical assistants.”

“Hence court ladies, yes. The shrine maiden coming from where she does, there’s a long trip involved, not to mention the distinct possibility of causing an international incident if anything goes awry. We needed people who know how to improvise.”

That explained why the test had taken such an odd form.

“What if none of us had passed the test?” En’en said.

“Then we would simply have had to ask someone else to go. A last resort, of course.”

Maomao was pondering who they might have sent when she thought of a lovely person who looked quite good in men’s clothes. With the exception of her parentage, Suirei was the most suitable person in every respect. She was probably considered a last resort because she was, in the end, a prisoner.

“If I may say so, Consort Aylin seemed rather worried about the shrine maiden and her illness. Would that be because the maiden is a check on her political enemies?” En’en said.

“You’ve got the general idea,” Lahan replied. Well, that was ambiguous. It was true that there was nothing *specifically* self-contradictory about what Lahan had said, but nonetheless something nagged at Maomao. The most successful lies were wrapped around a kernel of truth. She suspected that while Lahan wasn’t lying to them, he wasn’t telling the whole truth either.

Should I try to press the point? Maomao thought. But no: if she wasn’t careful, En’en or even Yao might catch on. Instead, she decided to stay silent for the moment.

Chapter 8: The Thought Behind the Thought

On their first day off in a long time, Maomao's suspicion that there was something going on turned to certainty. She wanted to know how things were going in the pleasure district, so she slipped out of the dormitory and headed for the Verdigris House.

She discovered more or less what the letters had insisted: that everything was fine. In the middle of the day, the place felt relaxed; an apprentice was sweeping by the front door and an obnoxious brat was playing with Maomao the cat.

"Freckles!" Chou-u exclaimed when he saw Maomao. He came charging over to her, still holding the cat, who fought and struggled and kicked Chou-u in the stomach until she managed to slip away from him, then sought shelter behind Maomao (the person). So at least she still remembered her.

Maomao plucked the creature up and ushered her over the fence, where she ran off. That was one fickle furball. Maomao hoped the cat would bring her some rare herbs as a thank you.

“Why don’t you ever come home?” Chou-u demanded.

“Because I’m working. I don’t have much choice.” Chou-u looked like he was about to cling onto her, so she stuck a hand against his head to hold him back.

Hm? Was it just her, or had he gotten taller? And his skin was more tan, maybe because he was outside playing every day. His front teeth had even straightened out, making him look markedly less dumb.

“Is Sazen around?” Maomao asked, glancing about in search of the apprentice apothecary.

“Yeah. He’s with the one-eyed guy right now.” So Kokuyou was here too.

Maomao made her way to the apothecary shop, which occupied a space rented from the Verdigris House, greeting familiar courtesans in passing as she went. She could hear voices from inside.

“That’s right. You need to make sure you grind it to a very fine powder. If you get the amount even slightly wrong when you make the pills, they won’t be as effective.”

“Okay...”

Sazen was pulverizing something, Kokuyou giving him diligent instructions. It was great that they were doing their jobs, but when she got a look at the two of them in the shop, her opinion quickly soured.

It was hot, which explained why all the doors and windows were open, but that caused problems of its own: several courtesans grinned as they watched the two men hard at work in these close quarters. Kokuyou could be downright attractive as long as he kept the scars on his face covered, and while Sazen’s appearance was unremarkable, he couldn’t be called ugly.

Those ladies are rotten to the core, Maomao thought. There were plenty of women out there with an enthusiasm for male-male love. The Verdigris House didn’t trade in male-male prostitution, so Maomao was sure the women were enjoying this.

She marched up to the two men, who seemed to have no idea that they were the source of such entertainment. “Looks like everything is going well here,” she said.

“Aw, yeah, we’re doing great!” Kokuyou replied, sounding every bit the dumbass he usually was.

“Uh, I think it’s been pretty tough,” Sazen said. He could barely keep the resentment off his face.

“I’m so glad you’re not having any problems.”

“Hey, aren’t you listening to me?!” Sazen wailed. Well, wasn’t he the one who’d written to her that everything was fine? Or had the old lady forced him to say that? Maomao knew that asking him about it would only get him started on a litany of complaints, so she decided to ignore him. Sazen could be so stubborn.

Maomao looked around the shop to make sure everything was in order, taking a quick survey to see if anything was out of stock—or if there was anything there that shouldn’t have been.

“What are these?” she asked. There was something resting on the medicine cabinet, and they weren’t medicine. In fact, she had never seen anything quite like them. They looked a bit like thin rice crackers. Some sort of snack, maybe?

“Oh, those. That’s my latest experiment!” Kokuyou said, taking one of the crackers and sprinkling some crushed medicine over it. “People can take their medicine by sprinkling it on one of these and eating it. Or they can soften it up in water and then put it inside!”

“Huh. That’s novel.” Maomao was legitimately impressed. An old saw had it that the best medicine for the body was the worst on the tongue, and one reason some people avoided medications was sheer bad flavor. Maomao sometimes got people to take their medicine by advising them to mix it with honey, but honey itself was a luxury item. If there was a way for people to take medicine without it ever touching their tongue, no one would have to worry about the taste. “Aren’t these a little large to swallow, though?”

“Yes. Yes, they are. Can’t recommend them for children or the elderly. They might choke.” He shook a pitcher of water as if to emphasize it was available. “I hear people take medicine this way all the time in the west. They say the people there have more saliva than we do.”

“Really? You’re very knowledgeable...” Maomao’s eyes were starting to shine. Kokuyou could look like a real dumbass, but he did actually know a thing or two about medicine. He certainly had strong basics; she could tell that from listening to him instruct Sazen. “Where did you learn your medicine, anyway, Kokuyou?” she asked. “You can’t possibly be entirely self-taught?”

“Ha ha ha! The person who took me under their wing, they came from a western country. Golden hair, thick fur all over their face and body.”

“Were they from Shaoh?”

“Hrm, farther west than that, I think,” he said.

That was enough to intrigue Maomao. “Do you speak their language?”

“Just a tiny bit.”

“And where is this person who raised you?” She’d like to meet them if she could.

“Oh, they’re gone now. This is what got ’em,” Kokuyou said, pointing to his smallpox scars.

“I see...” She was sorry to hear it. It wasn’t uncommon for doctors to contract an illness and die—in fact, it happened all the time. They spent more time with sick people than anyone else.

Sazen, who’d been completely left out of the entire conversation, nudged Maomao. “Uh, I’m sorry to interrupt when you’re having such a nice chat,” he said, “but they’re asking for you.” He pointed outside, where she saw the madam and Lahan waiting.

As so often, Maomao found herself in a private room designed for private conversations. The madam always provided accommodations in line with the potential for profit she saw in a visitor; it was one of her more amusing traits. Today the snacks she provided were on the high side of average. (Incidentally, when Lahan’s “father” visited, she put out only tepid water in a chipped teacup. At least she no longer chased him away with a broom.)

“I heard you were off today, so I thought you might be here. My good luck, here you are!”

“Good luck, sure. I know you checked before you came,” Maomao said. Lahan would never have done something like this without making the proper preparations. “But anyway, forget the niceties and get to the point, if you would. I’m busy.”

“Busy what? Chatting?”

“Maybe. But talking with *you* always just feels like a waste of time.”

“Tone! Tone! I am your honored elder brother, and you should speak to me as such.”

Maomao was tired of this banter; she was eager to move things along. “I know why you’re here. It’s about that thing you wanted with the medical assistants, right?”

“How nice that we’re on the same page,” Lahan said. He was a very careful man. No doubt he’d looked into Yao’s and En’en’s backgrounds, acquainted himself with their personalities, and had seen no cause for

concern. Yet he still wasn't willing to trust them with the true heart of the matter. "I still have questions about the examination you're to perform on the Shaoh shrine maiden."

"Such as?" Maomao asked.

"Such as, supposing the shrine maiden isn't the shrine maiden? If you get my drift."

She did not.

"Don't act all coy. Just tell me what's going on." Maomao picked up a steamed bun and bit it in half. The filling was sweet and sticky. She *tsk*'ed and put the remaining half on Lahan's plate. Maomao didn't much care for sweet things, but unfortunately for her, the madam didn't much care what she didn't much care for. She was out to please Lahan.

"You heard what the consort said—only a woman who hasn't menstruated can be shrine maiden."

"Yes, I heard her, but there are women who go their entire lives without menarche." It was unusual, but by no means unheard of.

Lahan, however, said, "Yes, but has such a woman ever had a child?"

That stopped Maomao cold. She frowned in surprise.

"That would turn everything on its head, wouldn't it?" Lahan said.

"When was this?" Maomao asked.

"There was a time when the shrine maiden was feeling indisposed and left the capital of Shaoh in order to recuperate elsewhere. That was about twenty years ago, and she returned from her convalescence only a few years back. Right when Consort Aylin was serving as apprentice shrine maiden."

Apprentice shrine maiden...

Maomao assumed that if Aylin had been an apprentice, she had been preparing to become the actual shrine maiden. Meaning that if the current shrine maiden hadn't been there, Aylin could well have filled the position herself by now.

Maomao tried to remember when it was that the painter had seen the beautiful, pale woman. There weren't that many people who fit his description, but a traveling painter wouldn't ordinarily have been able to lay eyes on someone as august as Shaoh's shrine maiden. If she were away recuperating in the countryside, though—then it might make sense. And if, during her recovery, the shrine maiden had borne a child...

"What are the chances of a pale woman giving birth to a pale daughter?" Lahan asked.

“Higher than one being born to a non-albino parent, I would assume,” Maomao said. If the father were also albino, a pale child could be almost guaranteed, but even if it were only the mother, it was a distinct possibility. If the shrine maiden had indeed given birth to a child, that would give rise to a whole host of questions. “You’re suggesting this child was the White Lady?”

Lahan grinned. The expression was unsettling on his face. “I can’t say for certain, but it would make sense, wouldn’t it? We have the White Lady under lock and key at the moment, but one thing she won’t do is tell us whose orders she was acting on. Although Consort Aylin is more than happy to claim that it was her fellow emissary, Ayla.”

Everyone seemed weirdly fixated on the White Lady. “You’re saying Lady Aylin saw this baby when it was born?”

“Maybe that’s why she’s turned to us.”

The White Lady, for whatever reason, had been running amok in a foreign country—Shaoh wouldn’t find that any more politically congenial than Li did. Some people, however, might be personally pleased by it.

“Just to be certain, the political enemy who chased Lady Aylin out of her home—it’s not this shrine maiden, is it? If it were, that would explain a few things itself,” Maomao said.

Aylin claimed that Ayla was behind everything, but what if she herself was the one pulling the White Lady’s strings, stirring up trouble in neighboring nations in order to bring down the pale shrine maiden whose position she begrudged? Ensuring that the shrine maiden wouldn’t be in the way when, sooner rather than later, Shaoh had to rely on Li for help?

Maybe Maomao was being asked to find out whether the White Lady was the shrine maiden’s daughter because such knowledge in itself would be a powerful trump card.

She shook her head. *Maybe I’m just overthinking things.* But why, then, was she being asked to investigate this?

“For the time being, I’m acting on the assumption that Consort Aylin is telling the truth,” Lahan said. “I don’t think she’s hostile toward the shrine maiden, but she does want to find out whether the woman is hiding anything. Quite simply, she may be thinking that when the truth comes out, it will provide leverage she can use to get the shrine maiden on her side. She claims Ayla unleashed the White Lady in order to undermine the shrine maiden, so she may well feel that the enemy of her enemy is her friend.”

“It’s amazing how easily such unsavory things roll off your tongue.”

Governments, however, were not monolithic; they could, one might say, be trilithic or even quadrilithic. The politically ousted Aylin might be willing to use any available means to get her revenge.

She certainly didn’t seem that way when she was here last year, though...

The two emissaries had come dressed in matching outfits, looking practically like twin sisters. Could so much have happened in just a year?

“Are you sure you’re not just helping Lady Aylin because you have a soft spot for pretty women?” Maomao asked.

“What a thing to accuse your honored elder brother of!”

She decided to ignore that. She didn’t have time for this.

In politics, you never knew who might become your enemy or when. Perhaps Aylin had entered the rear palace because she knew Li had apprehended the White Lady. If she succeeded in bringing the shrine maiden into her fold, did she mean to go back to Shaoh?

This is all so complicated. There were so many questions, so much room for doubt. Would she really share the truth about the White Lady so readily with someone from another country, even if it was to get the shrine maiden on her side? Didn’t it stand to become a major headache for Shaoh? *I guess she has her own reasons.*

Even Maomao, who was not a political animal, understood one thing: Li couldn’t just go executing the White Lady. That had to be her starting point for everything.

Lahan, thankfully, appeared to realize what she was thinking. “You don’t seem to see what I’m getting at. Let me put it this way: if the White Lady is the shrine maiden’s daughter, then as long as we have her in our custody, we have leverage over the shrine maiden—*and* we have a check on Ayla, who chased Aylin out of Shaoh.”

The White Lady was the key to the current international situation. Maomao frowned.

“You understand why I can’t speak of this to anyone else.” Presumably meaning Yao and En’en.

“That’s no excuse for dragging me into it,” Maomao said. She had half a mind to break his stupid spectacles.

“I was really worried about what I would do if you didn’t pass our test. I guess I would have had to go to the ‘Sui’ noble, but given her position, the hassle involved would have been unimaginable.”

Maomao guessed he was referring to Suirei. Making use of someone who was no longer supposed to exist would require a false identity. They could claim she was the daughter of some bureaucrat or other easily enough, but her real origins could still come back to haunt them—not to mention that she'd been a regular visitor to the medical office in the past. Everyone would be surprised, at best, if a woman who had died were to come back to life.

Maomao was concerned about what "status" she would be given as a result of this most recent test. She had urged them from the first simply to treat her as Luomen's adopted daughter. Now that he was a proper member of the medical staff, there should be no problem.

"So, what, you want me to go to Shaoh this time? It was hard enough getting to the western capital and back." Maomao had practically lost track of how long the round trip had taken.

"That's one thing you don't have to worry about," Lahan said, munching on the other half of Maomao's discarded bun. "The maiden is coming here."

"She's what?!" Maomao nearly yelled, startling Lahan so badly that he choked on the bun and had to swig some tea. "What do you mean, coming here? If she's sick, you can't make her travel all that way!" She rubbed her temples.

Lahan wiped some tea away from his mouth with his hand, then held out the hand imperiously to stop her. "That's politics. Li is as much a factor in Shaoh's thinking as Shaoh is in ours. Naturally they would want a presence at a major ceremony."

"Major ceremony?"

"Haven't you heard? With Empress Gyokuyou now His Majesty's legal wife and her son next in line for the succession, her family is to be officially granted a name. From Shaoh's perspective, that would mean a strong clan with direct ties to the Imperial family right on their border. They wouldn't want to come off looking second-best."

"Right."

He was talking about the young prince's formal debut, an occasion significant enough that emissaries from other countries would be present.

His Majesty's other sons have been too short-lived, Maomao reflected. All of them had died before such a ceremony could be held. Then again, the current prince was less than a year old. There may have been political considerations in presenting him this early.

“I grant the journey’s not a short one however you make it, but Shaoh has a major sea route. If you can go with the seasonal wind, it’s much faster than making the trip by land,” Lahan said.

“I’m still not sure.” If anything were to happen to the shrine maiden while she was abroad, it was easy—and worrying—to imagine responsibility being foisted on the host country. Hosting foreign dignitaries always carried such risks; the dignitaries’ political enemies might even see such moments as opportunities. If things went well, however, it would result in stronger ties with Shaoh.

“I know you might not want to do this, but you have to. That’s why I’m here, asking.”

Maomao fell into a sullen silence, sipping her cold tea. She’d heard enough that she could no longer pretend to ignore the situation.

“Incidentally, this was Master Jinshi’s idea.”

That bastard, Maomao thought. The words came dangerously close to making it out of her mouth, but she somehow forced them back down. With his social status being what it was, Jinshi couldn’t personally involve himself in just anything, but Maomao wished he would spare a thought for those he troubled in his stead.

“I assume I’ll be compensated for this work,” Maomao said.

“Leave the negotiating to me.” Lahan thumped his chest, the light glinting off his spectacles. If nothing else, Maomao knew she could trust him with this.

Chapter 9: Empress

And so the consort became an empress. Gyokuyou was now formally married to His Majesty, and it was important she made that clear to those around her. In battle, you could minimize casualties if you had an overwhelming strength advantage. If a consort of a similar rank to Gyokuyou had given birth to a son at the same time she had, there could have been a bloodbath. But it was Gyokuyou who had risen to become Empress because she had given birth to her child before Lihua had produced her own male heir.

Lihua's family lineage made her more than qualified to be Empress, but though she had borne a son before, she hadn't been elevated to that rank. Not without reason.

For one thing, there was no telling how long her child would live. But the lineage was itself something of a problem.

The Emperor seemed to be trying to avoid marrying someone who was too closely related to him, for in the past, that was precisely what had weakened the Imperial bloodline and allowed a single disease to kill off its members one after another. Lihua had every right to be Empress, yet her ancestry, over which she had no control, stood in her way.

Perhaps there was one more reason as well: a need to cozy up to Gyokuyou's family with an eye toward future diplomacy.

Whatever had gotten her there, Empress Gyokuyou now towered in status even over others who lived "above the clouds" in the Imperial court. People who didn't already know her personally might well be expected to cower in her presence, and did.

"Hee hee hee! I hope you like my snacks." It had been almost six months since Maomao had heard the dulcet tones of the preparer of these not-too-sweet treats: Yinghua, a lady-in-waiting who was eminently competent but also had a quick ear for rumors and gossip. Maomao was glad to see Yinghua treated her the same way she always had, even if Maomao didn't dare do anything so foolish as speak to her. The chief lady-in-waiting, Hongniang, was watching them both closely. However, the minder soon stepped out.

Suppose I could have one? Maomao wondered.

Not everyone in the room had the wherewithal for such frivolous pondering. Beside Maomao, Yao was frozen like a block of ice. En'en kept a poker face, but the little glances she kept stealing at Yao suggested she was worried about her. Once the women had become accustomed to making medical visits to the consorts in the rear palace, they had finally been called upon to be part of a visit to Empress Gyokuyou herself.

Gyokuyou had no doubt been looking forward to this. She had, after all, personally recommended Maomao to take the medical assistants' exam. She regarded Maomao's visit as one of her all-too-few pleasures, and was treating it as something of a tea party.

"Uh, where, ahem, is Dr. Kan?" Yao asked Yinghua. Dr. Kan—that referred to Maomao's father, whose full name was Kan Luomen.

"He went to examine the young prince," Yinghua replied. "Since you're all here, Lady Lingli and the ladies-in-waiting will all get checkups as well. There's nothing to do in the meantime, so Lady Gyokuyou suggested tea." Hongniang must have gone to keep an eye on the exams.

Princess Lingli had gotten big since Maomao had seen her last. When they'd arrived at the palace, the child who had been just a toddler before came running to see the visitors. She seemed to have her mother's willful streak. Sadly, she didn't remember Maomao, but she pegged the newcomers as playmates and followed them everywhere until Hongniang pried her away. The princess had looked quite dejected. Maomao figured they hadn't seen the last of her.

At least she's healthy. They both are. Empress Gyokuyou sat across from Maomao, eyes sparkling, eager for any hint of an amusing, titillating, or generally interesting story. *Which, unfortunately, I don't have, and if I did, I probably couldn't talk about it.* Well, she did have some tales to tell about the commander of the military, but she preferred not to speak of him and chose to keep them to herself.

Yinghua sat herself down with them, saying, "I'd love to hear some kind of juicy story. Don't you have anything?"

Always with the wheedling! Maomao thought. If she could have conjured up some engaging anecdote on demand, people might have considered her a better conversationalist, but unfortunately, chitchat was not her strong suit.

Someone most unexpected volunteered, however: En'en. "I have a story, though I don't know if it's exactly the kind you want to hear."

"Ooh, really?"

“It’s about something that happened long ago. If that’s all right?”

“I can’t wait to hear it,” Gyokuyou said, full of curiosity. En’en, normally so reticent, began to tell the tale.

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Long ago, there were two chefs who found themselves pitting their cooking skills against each other, not just as a matter of pride, but to earn a place as the head chef of a rich man’s household. One of the chefs had been born and raised in that land, while the other was a young up-and-comer from another place. Let us call them Chef and Young Chef.

The competition involved cooking the master’s favorite foods: eggs and dumplings. He also loved mushrooms, so some expensive ones were prepared for the chefs to use. Both the competitors were seasoned cooks; they could show their skill in even the plainest of dishes.

By all rights, there should have been little difference between them. For Young Chef, however, things didn’t go well. The eggs came out especially poorly, in no shape to be presented to the master. Young Chef at least managed to whip up some dumplings, but when the master tried them he flew into a rage and threatened to have Young Chef killed on the spot.

Young Chef was completely befuddled. The food had been prepared using only the ingredients that had been provided, which should have been identical to those the other chef was using.

What in the world had gone wrong?

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It’s not a story so much as...a riddle, Maomao thought. She glanced at En’en and realized she viewed this as some kind of test.

“Do you know why the dishes came out so wrong?” she asked with a glance in Maomao’s direction. This situation felt oddly familiar.

“Young Chef didn’t simply make a mistake in the recipe?” Yinghua asked. She still seemed the most domestic-minded of them, just as she had when Maomao had lived and worked at the Jade Pavilion. “Being young, after all.”

“Yes, but still a first-rate chef. Otherwise they wouldn’t have been summoned from so far away.” While En’en gave this explanation, her mistress Yao sat quietly, intensely focused on the ripples in her tea.

This must have been one serious mistake. If the dumplings had

produced such a furious reaction, they were talking about a screwup on the level of mixing up salt and sugar. *Maybe the chef's sense of taste was impaired?* No, that didn't seem likely. Maomao thought it was more probable that something had been wrong with the flavor from the start.

"A few questions," she said, raising her hand.

"Go ahead," En'en replied.

"What sort of water was used for the cooking?"

"Isn't water just water? You wouldn't deliberately use seawater or something, would you?" Yinghua objected.

Maomao would have shaken her head, but En'en did it first. "It wasn't seawater. However, fresh water was very valuable in this place, so it was common to use salt water for anything that wasn't going to be drunk. The water there was hard anyway, and the place was a producer of rock salt, so it was common to add that."

"Meaning that a chef who didn't know the qualities of the local water intimately could end up cooking with salt water without realizing it," Maomao said. That earned her a nod from En'en, while Yinghua clapped her hands as if it suddenly made sense to her. She did some cooking around the Jade Pavilion herself, and she seemed to have realized what must have happened.

Empress Gyokuyou, though, continued to look perplexed. "Would it really be that bad to boil your dumplings with salt water?" she asked.

It was Maomao who answered. "You pluck dumplings out of the water as soon as they're heated through. They float to the top; that's how you know they're done." The presence of salt in the water would change things. It would make the water heavier, meaning that the dumplings would float before they were fully cooked.

"So the dumplings were undercooked?"

"Yes, ma'am," Maomao said. En'en nodded. Apparently Maomao had the right answer.

"What about the eggs, then? Salt water wouldn't have anything to do with that, would it?" Yinghua said.

"If we knew exactly which egg dish was cooked and exactly which ingredients were used, I believe we could answer that question too," Maomao said.

"What do you think they cooked, then, and what do you think they used?" En'en replied.

"I'm going to guess steamed egg custard and hen-of-the-woods

mushroom.” Hen-of-the-woods was a luxury ingredient in some places. It was the first thing Maomao had thought of when En’en mentioned mushrooms. “Its pleasant texture is part of what makes it enjoyable to eat, so I assume Young Chef wanted to avoid overcooking it. However, raw hen-of-the-woods can be used to soften meat. Presumably the egg didn’t set correctly.”

“Oh!” Yinghua’s eyes sparkled with interest.

“That’s exactly right,” En’en said, going so far as to raise an eyebrow. She remained mostly expressionless, but it seemed to take the wind out of her sails how readily Maomao had answered her.

For some time now En’en had been more talkative than normal; by contrast, Yao had fallen silent. She was looking at the ground, almost as if she were embarrassed.

“Well, what happened to them? What happened to Young Chef?” Yinghua asked.

“Oh, don’t worry. They were rescued by another fine personage. They didn’t become the chef at that rich man’s mansion, but did find work at another household, one that was home to someone who wished to eat decent egg custard. Most fortunately, this young lady happened to be the daughter of someone with whom Young Chef was acquainted.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” Empress Gyokuyou laughed.

“Yes, milady. It so happened that Young Chef had a little sister, and thanks to this turn of events they were both saved from having nowhere to go.” The corners of En’en’s mouth crept up.

Wow, so she can smile? The expression was a kind one, and it seemed to be directed at the bashful Yao. *I see*. Maomao thought she understood why En’en had chosen to tell this particular story. Maomao’s choosing to keep her peace about it and feign ignorance was her own form of kindness.

The chat seemed as pleasant to Empress Gyokuyou as it did anxiety-inducing to Yao and the others. After En’en’s story, there was a bit of friendly gossiping, until Maomao’s old man returned amidst a clamor: Hongniang was there holding the crown prince, with Princess Lingli beside her.

“The child is the picture of health,” Luomen announced.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” said Gyokuyou, looking deeply relieved. The infant’s teeth were already coming in; gleams of white could be seen when he opened his mouth.

“I have some concerns about weaning him,” Luomen told Hongniang and the Empress. People’s bodies tolerated things differently. You couldn’t give babies honey, and fish or wheat could cause an allergic reaction. “When you introduce new foods into the Prince’s diet, do it little by little, and only one new food at a time.” Start the child on several new foods at once, and it would be impossible to tell what the problem was if he had a bad reaction.

This is the Emperor’s own son we’re dealing with, Maomao thought. Commoners, particularly those who lived in the poorer quarters, didn’t worry about giving a baby the wrong food—they often had no food to give it at all.

Yao and En’en listened attentively to what Luomen was saying. Incidentally, the quack doctor was also taking notes.

“Will it be safe for the prince to appear at his presentation?” Gyokuyou asked, a note of worry in her voice.

“Truthfully, I wouldn’t recommend keeping him in an unfamiliar setting for very long. Children find it tiring.” He might burst out crying when everyone was supposed to be quiet, or need his diaper changed. He could get hungry.

Two years earlier, Princess Lingli had come to one of the garden parties, and it had been a challenging experience. They’d had to put warm stones in her cradle to help keep her from catching a cold. This presentation would be even longer than that.

“I’ll tell His Majesty I think our boy shouldn’t stay very long,” Gyokuyou said.

“Thank you for understanding, ma’am,” Luomen replied.

Maomao could see why the Empress might be concerned. Her son was only one of the Emperor’s children; there was Princess Lingli too—and Consort Lihua’s son. He had a claim to the throne as well. While Maomao didn’t believe Lihua would do the unthinkable, others with a lust for power might not be so scrupulous. Lihua couldn’t control everyone who might be tempted to make an attempt on the prince’s life. There could be others whom she neither knew about nor could influence plotting harm to the crown prince.

In the past, there had been a palace lady who had attempted to poison one of the consorts. She’d done it out of love for her own mistress and entirely without the consort’s knowledge or consent. Her plot had failed. Any who wished for Consort Lihua to be the mother of the nation would

see the current crown prince as an obstacle to be removed.

Yes, there were many dangers.

Speaking of potential dangers... It had been some time since Maomao had seen Jinshi last, but where did he stand in all of this? *He has his own claim to the succession.*

Jinshi would come after the crown prince and Consort Lihua's child. Normally, an infant would not have been named crown prince; he would have been given more time to grow and to be observed by those around him. Jinshi, however, showed a complete disinterest in being emperor; he had been openly pleased by the birth of the prince and had even hoped to be reduced to the status of a common advisor. That, though, was not his decision to make.

So how will this all work out? Maomao wondered, gazing at the prince's hand, as red and as delicate as a maple leaf.

"It's over already? When will you be coming back?" asked Empress Gyokuyou, who wanted to keep chatting. Hongniang stood silently beside her.

They were just about to leave the Empress's residence when footsteps came pounding up behind them. It was Yinghua.

"Stop that, it's unseemly," Hongniang said. She was constraining herself to a quiet reprimand because the doctors were present, but Maomao knew that Yinghua would be in for a taste of her knuckle later.

"I believe you left something here. Would you be so kind as to come and get it?" Yinghua said, tugging on Maomao's wrist. She was grinning.

As soon as they were out of sight of the others, she let Maomao go.

"Did I really leave something?" Maomao asked.

"Oh, of course not. I just made that up," Yinghua said. "Unless maybe this counts." She pressed something into Maomao's palm: a hair stick with a jade ornament. Gyokuyou's symbol. Maomao had gotten a necklace of the same material back when she served at the Jade Pavilion.

"Lady Gyokuyou had them made for all her ladies-in-waiting when she became Empress. I got one too!"

"That's nice, but I'm not one of her ladies."

"She had an extra one made for you, hoping you might come back. She asked me to give it to you just now. She said it would be a waste to leave it lying around."

If that was true, then it would be rude not to accept her gift. However,

Maomao knew now that there was significance in accepting a hair stick.

"Lady Gyokuyou wishes you would keep working for her. You can come back anytime you feel like it," Yinghua said.

Easier said than done, Maomao thought. It was a tremendous opportunity, not the kind that came along every day, and on some level it was a shame to have to turn her down. Maomao believed that life working for Empress Gyokuyou would be pleasant, in its own way. *But I'm just not fit.* Not only in terms of social status; Maomao's personality would be something of a square peg in the round hole of the Empress's lifestyle.

"Oh, that's right. People would ask questions if the hair stick were the only thing I gave you." Yinghua gave Maomao three paper packages that smelled faintly of butter. "Share these with the other girls, all right? Sorry, I know you like savory stuff better."

So she even had an appropriate gift ready. Maomao took the snacks and made her way back to the front entryway, where the others were waiting.

Chapter 10: Covert Ops

The damp, stagnant air was disgusting, the humidity making his hair cling to his neck. Jinshi sat in his office and regarded the pile of paperwork with a mounting desire to flee.

There was little more depressing than doing administrative busywork during the hot, rainy season. Jinshi brushed the hair off the back of his neck, sat up in his chair, and flipped some pages. The characters were running a little; maybe someone had handled the paper with sweaty hands. He heaved a sigh and picked up the cup of tea, served cold, sitting on the corner of his desk.

He let the tea ripple in the cup. When had it appeared there? He had the sense it had been left when he'd gone to the bathroom a few minutes ago.

"Who put this tea here?" he asked the official in the office with him. Gaoshun had gone back to the Emperor and was no longer there. Basen would return when he had fully recovered. In the meantime, Jinshi was making use of a bureaucrat with a particular gift for paperwork.

"A court lady brought it while you were away from your seat, sir."

Jinshi was only human; nature sometimes called even on him. But for someone, a lady of the outer court no less, to wait for that exact moment to bring him tea, that was strange. A guard was posted at the door to his office at all times—except when Jinshi left the office, such as to use the toilet. Then the guard accompanied him. Perhaps the woman had known.

Jinshi's office was typically off-limits to court ladies. Back when he had been pretending to be a eunuch, there had been actual fights among the women about who got to bring him his tea. Even after he had left the rear palace, women would sometimes sneak bits of their hair or nails into his snacks as a love charm, or simply charge in when he was alone and tear off their clothes. Nothing but trouble. The bureaucrat who had been assigned to him might have been good at paperwork, but it seemed he wasn't acquainted with the specifics of Jinshi's situation.

Jinshi opened a drawer of his desk and took out an item wrapped in cloth. With measured movements, he unwrapped it to reveal a silver spoon, which he held with the cloth and used to stir the tea.

The shining silver promptly turned cloudy. Jinshi was at least grateful

his assailant had used a nice, obvious poison.

The blood drained from the official's face as he watched. In fact, Jinshi wanted him to see this, in order to judge his reaction. At least the man understood what the besmirched silver signified. It seemed he really hadn't known about the poison.

Jinshi handed the spoon to the guard at the door, who didn't so much as blink as he rewrapped the utensil and placed it in the folds of his robes. His relief would come soon. He would probably hand the spoon on after that.

"Can you describe the woman who brought this?" Jinshi asked the bureaucrat.

"W-Well," the man began. He was all out of sorts and failed to give much useful information. She was "young." Not very tall. At least it proved one thing: that the man was dedicated to his job. He'd been so focused on his paperwork that he hadn't taken special note of the woman who had walked in. Jinshi observed, incidentally, that there was a cup of tea on the bureaucrat's desk as well—half empty.

Sigh. Very well. Jinshi took out another spoon and stirred the official's tea, but this spoon showed no reaction. "You're safe," he said. An unmistakable look of relief passed over the man's face before he shrank back, obviously chagrined.

Jinshi wasn't in any mood to reprimand him. He just wanted someone to take care of the paperwork. This man seemed good enough at his task, and on top of that, he never looked at Jinshi like he had any funny business in mind. All Jinshi needed was for the guy to do a decent job until Basen got back.

"Put it out of your mind. There's more work to do," Jinshi said. He set the poisoned tea on a corner of his desk and went back to his papers. His assistant, still pale as the grave, returned to his desk.

Jinshi tried not to let the other man notice as he heaved a sigh.

His days were restless, tense. He'd lost track of how long it had been since he'd quit pretending to be a eunuch. Months. Being part of the court proper meant much, much more work, and he seemed to get less sleep every day. He'd at least been escaping into town to take a breather every ten days or so, but there was none of that anymore.

Jinshi had finished his work for the day and was sitting on a couch in his room. He'd had his dinner and taken his bath, so now all that was left was to go to bed. But he didn't feel like sleeping, not after what had

happened that afternoon.

"How about some nice fruit, Master Jinshi?" His ever-considerate lady-in-waiting, Suiren, brought him some pear slices, each on its own little skewer.

"Give," he said. Perhaps it sounded a mite childish, but this was his milk mother, a woman who had known him since before he'd been weaned. It was just the two of them; she wouldn't be upset.

He put a piece of pear in his mouth, savoring the crunch and the light, sweet flavor. The juice was cool and refreshing as it went down his throat. He thought about asking for a cup of wine, but decided that tonight, he would be satisfied with this.

"You must be so tired. You haven't been into town lately, even on your days off. Your work is taking all your time and energy," Suiren said.

"Yes, well, that's what happens when the work is endless. Going forward, I think I may need more assistants."

"And more *ladies-in-waiting*, I might add."

Jinshi's milk mother was on the cusp of old age, and she sometimes remarked how the years weighed upon her. He would have liked to hire some ladies-in-waiting, but his circumstances being what they were, it wasn't easy.

"Ah, how I wish Maomao would come back!" Suiren said.

You and me both, Jinshi thought, but he only shook his head. He knew it wasn't possible. "I'm sure she knows you'd just work her like a dog again."

"Well, what's the point of hiring someone who can't do her job?" Suiren replied, her voice as sweet as her words were harsh. She could be very soft on Jinshi, but word was that every lady-in-waiting who served under her considered her a monster. "I must say, the amount of work I do every day is too much for these old bones," she went on, accompanied by a demonstrative rubbing of her shoulders. "Oh, if only you would hurry up and take a consort, Master Jinshi, even just one, my life might be a little easier..."

Jinshi could only give a dry smile. "Don't you worry that if I picked the wrong lady, your work would only increase?"

"No, indeed. It would make hiring new ladies-in-waiting so much simpler. It's because they covet the position of your wife that they come after you with such fervor. Not that I imagine those types would vanish, but we could cut down on them significantly." She sounded like she was

talking about garden pests.

When Suiren began speaking of consorts, there was only one person Jinshi thought of. He knew *she* considered the whole idea nothing but trouble. It might have been one thing had she been the cloistered daughter of some well-to-do family, but for someone who had the means to support herself already and live her own life, being Jinshi's consort could only be suffocating.

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“Young master,” Suiren said sadly, observing Jinshi’s grim countenance. “Before I served you, I served His Majesty. I wasn’t perhaps as close to him as I am to you, but I knew him.”

“I can imagine.”

“His first consort, Lady Ah-Duo, had quite a rough time! I know she was subject to harassment from a great many women.”

Jinshi thought of the handsome lady who dressed in men’s clothes and was now in seclusion. It was hard to picture her the object of mean-spirited pranks.

“They could be terribly cruel. It was so bad that I wondered if I should try to intervene, until suddenly I discovered they had all fallen into line with her.”

Jinshi didn’t reply. So Ah-Duo had always been Ah-Duo.

“At first, when His Majesty sought Lady Ah-Duo, I thought it must be some kind of joke. She was his milk sibling, practically one of the boys. They still played games of tag until who knows when.” Yes, Jinshi had heard people say that if she’d been born a man, Ah-Duo would have been the Emperor’s right hand. “With all possible respect to Empress Gyokuyou, I must say His Majesty was deeply disappointed to realize that the one he truly wanted by his side was in no position to be there.”

“What are you getting at?” Jinshi finally said.

“Oh, nothing. Just the ramblings of an old woman. I simply hoped you might choose a path that would leave you without regrets.” With that, Suiren picked up the plate, which had a lone slice of pear still on it, and left the room.

“Without regrets,” Jinshi mumbled. That would not be easy.

Chapter 11: Before the Celebration

It was high summer, and there was a festive atmosphere in the capital. Visitors from foreign parts meant money flowed freely. Events and happenings would naturally build until there was a spontaneous, unofficial party in swing.

Celebrations were not inherently bad. They made everyone lively and happy, in the court as much as beyond it. And how did that liveliness manifest itself within the palace walls?

"Overwork." Such was the one-word verdict the physician rendered on the pale-faced bureaucrat. The man had bags under his eyes and a thousand-yard stare. "Be sure you get some sleep. You'll work yourself to death, literally."

Sleep was so important. People thought they could go without it for a day or two, but it would catch up with them—come back to haunt them—as they got older. At one point, Jinshi had been getting dangerously little sleep himself. Every time he came to the pleasure quarter, Maomao had made him take a nap.

Setting up shop in the capital meant getting the bureaucracy's permission. Street stalls might appear on a whim, but a proper storefront demanded permits, for tax purposes if nothing else. If you were caught evading the necessary red tape, the best you could hope for was a heavy fine—you might even be thrown in prison.

Festivals always attracted crowds. Foreigners were coming, which meant trade goods would be more readily available, and plenty of people had come to the capital hoping to get their hands on some. All of which meant the civil officials were doing paperwork morning, noon, and night.

The soldiers had been busy as well. The frequency of the freak strategist's visits declined, for which Maomao was grateful. Then again, it might have been more accurate to say that after the food-poisoning incident, his subordinates had set up something of a dragnet for him.

More people meant more potential for crime, and it was the soldiers' job to shore up public safety. Between the fact that they could simply allocate training time to work instead and the fact that they were generally muscle-brains, there was much less collapsing among the soldiers than

among the unfortunate bureaucrats. There were, however, more injuries.

"Hfff! Can't you be a little more careful?!" demanded a soldier as Yao daubed some medicine on a cut a good three *sun* long.

It's just a flesh wound, Maomao thought. The soldier had sustained it, he said, when he'd confronted a man who'd opened a stall without a permit and was selling dodgy medicines. When they'd tried to shut down his shop, he'd pulled a knife on them.

"I'm sorry," Yao said steadily, although Maomao could see her lips purse. She didn't look angry so much as like she was holding back tears.

En'en discreetly went to help out. She offered the soldier a cup. "This should numb the pain," she said, although Maomao was fairly confident she'd simply picked up a cup of cold barley tea.

The physicians still only rarely let the young women handle patients, but they thought quite highly of En'en's small, thoughtful touches like that. Complaints about the medical office had allegedly diminished.

And what was Maomao doing? She was busily making medicines. The doctors had felt that she could at least be entrusted with preparing simple balms, and if she suppressed her desire to work on more exotic concoctions, it wasn't so bad. It was the right place for her: she had neither the attitude nor, compared to the other two, the looks to be dealing with patients.

"Maomao, balm?" Since the incident with the cookies, En'en had taken to speaking to Maomao in a distinctly more informal tone. Her change in attitude had prompted Yao to start talking to Maomao a little more herself, so maybe En'en had done it in order to change her mistress's childish behavior. Maybe.

"Balm, here you go," Maomao said. As she was about to hand the stuff over, she glanced at the patient. It was the whiny soldier. An awful lot of noise he made for a pretty minor injury. Without a word, Maomao grabbed some balm she had in the folds of her robes, swapping it for the medicine she'd been about to give to En'en.

The perfect chance. Such an animated patient would be the perfect opportunity to test out her new salve.

Maomao was startled by a voice from behind her: "What do you think you're doing?" She looked back to find an elderly physician glowering at her. "You just swapped those medicines, didn't you?"

"Why, whatever do you mean, sir?" she asked. She was trying to sound as innocent as she could, but the physician grabbed her experimental

medicine. Still glaring at her, he swiped a finger through it.

"This has something in it. Something unusual mixed in."

"I reiterate, sir, whatever do you mean?"

This time Maomao's attempt at deflection only earned her a knuckle to the head.

"For your information, Luomen asked us to be especially strict with you." It would be hard for her to wriggle out of this with someone who knew her father. This doctor was the strictest in the medical office, and he already suspected her of having gotten her position because of her family connections. "What did you put in this?"

After a moment Maomao responded, "A little bit of frog." She'd heard frog oil was supposed to be good and wanted to try it, but it had proven hard to get oil from frogs, and in the end she'd only been able to make what the doctor was currently holding in his hand. "I've heard they use frog oil as a medicine in foreign countries."

"Have you, now? I certainly haven't."

In fact, neither had Maomao. She'd simply thought it might be possible it would have some sort of effect. She'd been careful to choose a nontoxic frog, and had confirmed there were no obvious ill effects by testing it on herself. She wasn't savage enough to subject someone else to a concoction she hadn't even checked for toxicity.

"In any case, I'm confiscating this."

"What? No!"

Thus she found her medicine taken away. And after she'd spent her day off scrounging around in the rice paddies!

"Did you say...frog?" Yao asked, her face pale. It looked like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You would put frogs in *medicine*? There must be something wrong with you!"

Maomao dug in one ear with her finger and ignored her. She must have been over the line, for En'en nudged her with her elbow. So she said, "I can understand you might not be acquainted with such things, but they're quite a typical meal among the common people."

Yao looked even more disbelieving than before. She turned to En'en as if to ask whether that could possibly be true.

"She's right, milady. Frogs are frequently eaten. You might also be interested to know that sometimes people try to pass off sliced snake meat as fish."

Whatever color was left in Yao's face drained away at the mention of

snakes.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure no snakes end up on your table," En'en assured her.

"I would be perfectly happy to see them on *my* table," Maomao offered. The profusion of tiny bones could make them some work to eat, but all you had to do was fry them up and it was fine. If the smell bothered you, some fragrant or medicinal herbs could take care of it. In fact, Maomao had a few skewers of dried snake meat with her as a nice little snack in case she started to get peckish. She took one from her bag and held it out to Yao in silent invitation, but Yao only shook her head and turned limply to the wall. Maomao shrugged and put the skewer back.

"No slacking, ladies!" snapped the doctor, and the three women abandoned their chat and got back to work.

Maomao and the others had lunch at a nearby dining hall. The food was free and you could even get seconds, but if you didn't want what they were serving, you had to bring your own meal or snack.

The court ladies ate separately from the men. Usually, Yao acted all but indifferent toward Maomao, but at meal times she edged a little closer on account of the atmosphere in the dining area.

Whether it be the rear palace or the pleasure quarter, there was a side of women that only came out with other women. When the ladies were off in their own corner of the dining hall, where the men wouldn't see or hear them, that was when the talk really started.

"I give up. I just can't abide soldiers. He gets paid well, but he's so busy, and so much of his money goes to all the food he needs. He doesn't even treat me to a decent meal!"

"Ugh, that's awful. But civil officials aren't so great either. That one who chatted me up the other day? Remember him? Well, it was nice of him to ask, but—ugh. I just don't think I have anything to talk about with a man who's made his way in life by organizing shelf after shelf of moldy books! I can't even accept his hair stick. It's so old-fashioned, I wouldn't be caught dead with it!"

"Oh, take it. I know you—you're just going to pawn it anyway."

Many of the court ladies came from high-ranking families, but their personalities weren't always as good as their upbringings. It was something of a difficult reality for a genuinely prim and proper young lady.

Maomao usually chose a seat in a corner of the dining area, and wherever she went, Yao would dart after her. She knew that if Maomao was there, the crueler ladies, especially those who were hostile to the newly minted medical assistants, would keep their distance.

I just tried to give them fair warning, Maomao thought, but now they wouldn't get anywhere near her. It was like the Crystal Pavilion all over again.

So what had happened? There had been a court lady who'd decided to launch a preemptive strike against what she took to be the naive young medical assistants. She'd approached them with a train of hangers-on, in fact looking much like Yao had at the beginning. But where Yao had obviously been passionate about her work, this woman gave the impression that she was mostly at the palace in hopes of landing a mate. The way she seemed to have a different male dining companion at every meal, it was almost as if she took pride in being a woman of easy virtue.

Maomao couldn't help but notice a rash around the woman's mouth. "It seems you have a substantial number of partners," she'd said. "Are you aware of the risks of illness?" She was just making sure.

"I wouldn't be with a man who was *sick*!" the woman had said, whereupon Maomao had told her about how sexually transmitted diseases could be present but dormant, and how even if her partner wasn't sick, one of *his* other partners might be, and the illness could still be passed to her. She wasn't the only one who could sleep around, after all. Finally, Maomao had explained that several sexually transmitted diseases could be communicated at once.

"Have you been feeling tired?" she'd asked. "Any swelling or soreness in your private areas? Or bleeding, for that matter?"

As Maomao had proceeded with her questioning, the woman had grown paler and paler and finally vacated the scene. Maybe, Maomao reflected, it had been a misjudgment to handle her the same way as she did the courtesans at the Verdigris House. But if the woman wasn't treated promptly, her nose might rot and fall off.

Maomao had been talking to the woman very much in earnest, but meanwhile Yao's face had been bright red. En'en must not have known much about sexually transmitted diseases, for she had been taking copious notes.

Now, to return to the present moment. Today's meal was congee, soup, and one of several side dishes. Choice of sides was free, but show up too

late and they might be out of your favorite. We mentioned the small quantities of food, but that was because in general, full meals were served only in the morning and evening. The afternoon service was essentially a large snack.

For her side dish, Maomao took steamed chicken with cold vegetables. Meat dishes were popular and always went to the early birds. The other two women took the same thing.

"Just so you know, I'm not copying you," Yao said.

I didn't say you were, Maomao thought. In its own way, her behavior was sort of charming, and ever since she'd had that realization, Maomao had started to develop an affection for the other court lady. She was an awful lot easier to deal with than a sycophant who kept her true intentions hidden.

The other side dishes included fish and something vinegared. The fish did look a bit like snake meat, if you squinted; maybe that was why Yao hadn't wanted it. Call her twisted, but the realization made Maomao want to tweak the young woman just a bit. They set up camp in their usual corner, but whereas Maomao normally ate in silence, today she said, "They say some sort of foreign dignitary is coming, right?" It had been all the talk recently. "Did you know that in the desert, snakes and lizards are considered important sources of nutrients? They eat them all the time there."

Food culture differs from place to place, as one would discover quickly by going west—and indeed as Maomao had learned firsthand on her trip to the western capital. She hadn't gotten to do any sightseeing as such, but there had been a lot of strange offerings at the street-side food stalls. Suirei, with her aversion to snakes and insects, had been at her wits' end, Maomao recalled with a warm glow.

"Maomao," En'en said, giving her a discouraging look.

Yao's spoon was frozen in midair. "I'm not hungry anymore," she said, putting the spoon down. It looked like Maomao had gone a bit too far.

"Lady Yao, you need your food," En'en said.

"I might have some appetite for a snack," Yao replied, still looking a little miffed. En'en thought about it for a second, then produced a cloth packet she unwrapped to reveal a bamboo cylinder—a canteen. The cafeteria servings were never enough for Yao's voracious appetite, and En'en was always prepared with a supplement.

"You can have this after you finish your meal," she said, glancing

Yao's way. Yao grumbled but started in on her congee again.

She knows how to handle her, Maomao thought. As for what was in the canteen, En'en got a bowl and emptied the contents into it, revealing something sweet-smelling, translucent, and moist.

"*That's* your snack?" Maomao said. Yao really was rich—this was a luxurious treat. The perfect summer dessert. It even showed up in Empress Gyokuyou's evening meals every once in a while.

"It's Lady Yao's favorite," En'en said. She accompanied the remark with a finger to her lips, correctly guessing that Maomao knew what the dessert was.

Here I thought she was looking out for Yao! It was cruel, what she was doing. Was this, too, in the interest of helping Yao *grow*?

"Mmm! It's a little warm, but it's still good," said Yao, digging into her jiggling snack with gusto.

The name of the dish? Hasma. The nature of the ingredients? Frogs' reproductive organs. For Yao's sake, Maomao decided not to say anything.

Chapter 12: Child of a Foreign Land

“Rather lively today, isn’t it?” Luomen said, although he seemed perfectly relaxed. He wasn’t wearing his white doctor’s outfit today; he was in men’s clothing, although his pudgy silhouette and warm expression still gave him the appearance of an old lady. He made his way slowly but steadily along the thoroughfare, leaning on his cane.

“Careful not to trip,” Maomao said, keeping a watchful eye out as she walked at his side. Roads weren’t normally a problem for him, but this one was particularly busy, made even more so by the festival atmosphere. For an old man missing a kneecap, a stray bump from a passerby could be enough to send him sprawling.

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are. Just humor me.”

Normally Maomao might have spoken more bluntly to her father, but today she tried to mind her manners. There were other people present. Namely Yao and En’en, along with the doctor who was forever getting angry at Maomao. A soldier was with them too, as a bodyguard.

What brought them outside the palace confines? A shopping trip. Only Yao had gone last time, but today all three of the girls were along. That was partly because there wasn’t too much to carry, and partly because the medical office was too busy to spare all its doctors. The last shopping trip had demonstrated how tricky things could get with no physicians present.

There was arguably one more reason as well: the person they would be purchasing medicine from was a foreigner. Maomao’s father was the most accomplished in the foreign tongue among the medical staff, while Maomao, En’en, and the other doctor each knew at least a little. On this trip, Yao was just along for the ride.

“We should have taken a carriage,” Maomao grumbled.

“A carriage? With all these people around? We would only have been a nuisance,” Luomen said. He sounded cheerful, but Maomao thought it was cruel to make an injured old man walk all this way.

Other than that, she was very happy with the situation. She got to be with her father *and* see some uncommon medicine. Exciting!

“Don’t do anything unless we tell you to,” said the other doctor—call

him Scary Doctor—glaring at Maomao. (Hey, she knew how to behave herself in public.) She'd long had the feeling that he was keeping an eye on her, and since the incident with the frog-based salve the other day, his surveillance had only become more intense. Incidentally, she had finally started to remember his name just recently. It was Dr. Liu.

"Sorry about this," Luomen said, but he didn't contradict the other man. He was going to defer to Dr. Liu.

Yao seemed to have a little more respect for Maomao's father than before. As ever, En'en was doing whatever she could to help Yao, and the young mistress had recently been quite personable.

She was just sheltered.

Yao was trying to look nonchalant, but Maomao saw her eyes dart to the storefronts from time to time. She looked antsy, ready to run; she didn't seem used to the volume of people. En'en was watching just as closely as Maomao, and although her face remained impassive, there was something hidden behind that deliberately blank expression. Her eyes sparkled like she'd spotted a baby squirrel and was enjoying the sight. Maybe Yao had been brought along this time because the doctors figured she hadn't gotten used to going shopping the first time.

Think she's really cut out for this? Maomao wondered. En'en was diligently minding Yao. *If I had to guess, I would say she's enjoying it.* Well, that was better than having to force her kicking and screaming.

While Yao was busy being distracted as they passed a candy crafter, the group arrived at their destination. It was a luxurious restaurant—one Maomao had made use of before. It was amply supplied with private rooms where its typically rich clientele could have private conversations.

Awfully convenient, those rooms...

Foreign products, even just medicine, were valuable. If you weren't careful when you went to pick them up, you could find yourself robbed on the way home. That explained the bodyguard too.

It being the middle of the day, there were quite a few female customers. At lunchtime, the restaurant sold light snacks, and the fresh steamed buns looked enticing.

"This way, please." A server showed them to their room, where a foreign man with light hair waited. He was very hairy, except for his chin; he wore a thick mustache but no beard.

Luomen entered the room, but when Maomao and the others started to follow, the foreigner held up a hand. He and Luomen conferred. The group

was too far away to hear what they were saying, but Maomao saw her father shake his head and look back at them. “He says only three people may enter.”

“What?”

Three people? That meant Maomao and the other two assistants would have to wait outside. Obviously the two doctors would be essential, and they would want the bodyguard with them just in case.

“In fact, he thinks we shouldn’t have brought women at all,” Dr. Liu said. “I guess we should have had you accompany us when we were dealing with someone else.” Maomao’s shoulders slumped. Was she going to be condemned to wait in the hallway the entire time? Then Dr. Liu handed her a piece of paper. “I’m sure you know how to handle a shopping trip. Could you pick up some other items for us while we’re doing this?”

The paper contained a detailed list—of the preferred sweets and treats of the doctors who hadn’t been able to join them. The list was quite extensive, and Dr. Liu accompanied it with a substantial amount of change.

“If there’s money left over, you can buy what you like with it. Craft candies, say. Be back here in a couple of hours.”

“Yes, sir,” Maomao said. Dr. Liu did nothing but get angry at her, yet he didn’t neglect to provide for candy for them. He hadn’t failed to notice Yao taking in the street stalls.

“You *do* know how to handle money, don’t you?” Yao asked Maomao, perhaps annoyed that she had been entrusted with the cash.

Does she realize what she’s saying? Yao was as good as announcing that she herself hadn’t known how to use money until recently. She seemed quite proud of her newly acquired knowledge. *Maybe they were hoping to teach her a thing or two about shopping by bringing her along,* Maomao thought. Behind her, En’en’s eyes were shining, as if to say *Isn’t my mistress the cutest?*

Maomao knew that hanging on to the money would only earn her more grumbling, but she wasn’t entirely comfortable giving it to Yao. By process of elimination, she handed the list and the cash to En’en. Yao still seemed less than pleased, but she wasn’t going to fight En’en having the purse strings.

“How about we start with the steamed buns?” En’en suggested. She had the money, so it was only natural that she dictate the agenda. When

Maomao stole a peek and saw the name of the shop, though, she frowned. “Something the matter?” En’en asked.

“That place is always sold out by lunchtime,” she said, pointing in the direction of the store.

“You heard her, Lady Yao.” Ah, En’en really was quick on the uptake.

“What? Heard what?” Yao was still clueless as Maomao grabbed one of her hands and En’en grabbed the other. They both started to pull.

“If they sell out, *we’re* the ones who’ll get in trouble!” En’en said.

Yao flinched. “Let’s hurry, then!”

Hand in hand in hand, the three of them sprinted for the buns for all they were worth.

If they’d pictured a pleasant afternoon wandering the main street together, they were much mistaken. At last they stood in the shade of a willow tree, Maomao and Yao and En’en, their breath heaving.

“Doctors must earn a pretty nice salary,” Maomao said, her tone more than a little bitter as she looked at the mountain of treats in pretty packages. “There’s a lot of fresh-made stuff here. Think they’ll be able to eat it all before it goes stale?” They’d been to what felt like every place in town. Dr. Liu had said they could spend whatever was left over—but *was* there anything left over?

Yao wheezed; she wasn’t used to running and was so spent she couldn’t speak. En’en, ever attentive, bought her some juice from a nearby shop.

All the snacks they had been instructed to purchase had come from well-known establishments; Maomao recognized a number of the treats served at the Verdigris House as well. Dr. Liu had probably given Maomao the money because he knew she would be acquainted with many of the stores.

“I really think this should be enough,” En’en said, scanning the piece of paper. There was one more name on the list.

“Oh, that place.” Maomao’s shoulders slumped. It wasn’t exactly close, and she didn’t feel like walking that far. “They’ve probably still got stock, and we’ve got an hour yet...”

She glanced at Yao, who appeared rejuvenated by the juice. “I’m good to go,” she said.

Maomao and En’en looked at each other, both cocking their heads, wondering what to do.

“May I ask what you’re doing, En’en? You two seem to...signal each other a lot these days,” Yao said.

“I simply wouldn’t want you to overexert yourself, Lady Yao,” En’en said.

“Well, that’s too bad, because I’m going. I’m going, and that’s final!”

“Very well.” En’en’s remained unfazed, but inside she was no doubt marveling at how adorable her mistress was when she was trying to put on a brave face. From behind, Maomao could see that En’en’s shapely tush was quivering with delight.

Maomao guided them along. “The shop’s on a side street a little off the main road...” It was a nuisance having her arms full of packages. Then again, Yao, still trying to prove she was up to these kinds of things, had insisted on carrying more of the baggage than anyone. At least Maomao had it better than her.

I do admire her refusal to be beaten, she thought. There were plenty of people out there who were content to lord it over others simply because they happened to have been born well. At least Yao wasn’t like that. Maomao suspected it was the same facet of her personality that had driven her to apply to become a medical assistant when she took the court ladies’ exam.

Strictly speaking, the shop for which they were heading was not a snack place. It was more a supplier of exotic ingredients. Any physician who mixed up medicines could also do a little cooking, and this place specialized in unusual condiments and flavorings.

The town felt very different once they got off the main road. They saw more commoners’ dwellings as they wove their way between shops. A cat yawned in the shade of a tree, while small children in bibs tried to get its attention with a bobbing foxtail. There were women doing laundry in the canal, and a dog tied up watching a chicken in a cage who seemed likely to be that evening’s dinner.

“Th-This is where the shop is?” Yao asked, uneasy. In answer, Maomao pointed at a small sign. It bore the name of the last place on their list. Yao was visibly relieved. “They should set up shop somewhere more, you know...reputable.”

“The closer you are to the main street, the higher the taxes,” Maomao said. The better your location, the more people went by your shop—and the more money the tax man figured he could squeeze out of you. “Come on, let’s wrap up this list,” she said. She started for the store, but suddenly

En’en stopped. “What’s wrong?” Maomao asked.

En’en pointed to the far side of the canal, where they saw a gaggle of children surrounding a little girl. Maomao wondered if they were playing a game, but no, it didn’t quite seem like it. What was going on here? While she was still trying to figure it out, she saw someone go running across the small bridge over the canal—it was Yao.

“What are you doing?” she yelled, startling the children. “You’re bullying that poor girl!” Her shouting sent the kids scattering.

She’s so...how do I put this? Young, Maomao thought, but trotted after her just the same. There was only one child standing in front of Yao now: the girl who’d been surrounded by the others. The victim of the bullying, if Yao was right.

“Huh?” Yao said, puzzled. “Do you see this girl?”

Maomao looked the child in the face, and she was puzzled too.

“It looks like she’s from a foreign land,” En’en said. The girl’s clothes were in typical Li style, but her facial features weren’t the typical Li look. Maomao took her to be somewhat less than ten years old. Her hair and eyes were dark, but her skin was fairer and ruddier than their own. She had a lovely face, with perfectly positioned eyes and pronounced eyebrows.

Her skin reminds me of Empress Gyokuyou’s.

She might be of mixed parentage, then, but Maomao could see why En’en had assumed she was foreign-born: there were markings around her eyes. That was extremely unusual in Li, since here tattoos were normally imposed on criminals. Few people would voluntarily get them (making Maomao and her freckles a notable exception to the rule). This wasn’t the mark of any crime, however. It looked more like a ward or charm. A red, vine-like pattern.

“Are you all right?” Yao asked, but the girl only looked at her with a confused expression. Yao was dismayed. “I guess you don’t understand me,” she said. If only they could get a word out of her—but the child didn’t say a thing.

“I don’t think she *can* talk!” said one of the kids Yao had sent running. “She looked like she was lost, so we asked her where she was from, but she wouldn’t say a word! We all tried asking her together, but I don’t think she has a voice.” With that, the child ran off again.

“Um...” Yao had been so willing to jump right in, but now she seemed at a loss for what to do.

Don’t look at me, Maomao thought. They were confronted with a mute

child who was from another country, so they couldn't have communicated even if she could speak.

"What do we do?" Yao asked.

That's what I'd like to know!

Human beings are creatures that communicate using language. Being deprived of that ability is inconvenient to say the least, as Maomao and the others were discovering.

Yao crouched in front of the little girl. "Okay, uh... Your name! What's your name?" she ventured. The girl continued to stare back, sweet but uncomprehending. She said nothing, but she appeared to be listening to Yao, trying to understand her—so apparently she could hear.

If she could say something, we might at least be able to figure out what country she's from... But no such luck; the child made not a peep.

Having gotten herself into this, Yao was bent on at least figuring out where the child was from, but she was looking less and less hopeful. She stole the occasional glance back at Maomao and En'en, but En'en only watched, making no move to help her mistress. *She could stand to lend a hand,* Maomao thought. Early on, she'd taken En'en to be Yao's faithful servant, but over time she had come to see it was more complex than that. Yes, Yao was very important to En'en, and yes, En'en served her impeccably, but...

There's something a little...twisted about it. Such was Maomao's conclusion. Sometimes when someone was just too adorable, it left you wanting to tease them a bit—but it wasn't quite that either. However you described it, it left En'en watching with distinct gratification as Yao flailed.

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They were going to run out of time if this went on much longer, so Maomao was about to step in and try to help—but she was preempted by En'en. "Lady Yao, I don't think she speaks our language. Let me try instead," she said.

"Yes, please!" Yao said, relieved. She was obviously grateful for the help. Maybe she wouldn't have felt quite so glad if she'd realized En'en had been savoring the sight of her struggle until that moment.

Ignorance is what, again? Maomao thought, watching the two of them from under lidded eyes.

En'en asked the child her name in a foreign language. Of course, there were a lot of foreign languages. Maomao spoke a smattering of Shaohnese, and could read and write a few simple words in the tongues of places farther west, but she was self-taught and had no confidence in her pronunciation. En'en, by her own admission, didn't speak much more than Maomao, so it was slow work talking to the girl. Her efforts, however, made the child's eyes widen; she started to bounce up and down. Something, whatever it was, had gotten through.

"She must be from Shaoh," En'en said. Aylin had golden hair and blue eyes, but that wasn't true of everyone from the region. Dark hair and eye colors were more likely to be passed down from parents to children, making it only natural that black and brown be the most common.

"I guess she understood you...but we still don't know her name," Yao said. The little girl still hadn't spoken a word. She did, however, touch her throat and proceed to make an *x* shape with her hands in front of her neck.

"I think she means she can't speak," Maomao said. Then she ventured a few words in Shaohnese: <You can't talk?> The girl made a circle with her hands this time, a sign of approval.

Maomao picked up a branch that was lying on the ground and scratched a few characters in the dust to demonstrate what she had in mind. Then she gave the branch to the girl. <Can you write your name?> she asked.

The girl shook her head. Instead she drew a picture—some kind of flower, although exactly what kind was hard to tell.

"Doesn't look like she knows how to write either," Maomao remarked.

"So what do we do?" Yao asked.

"You tell me," Maomao said. Yao was the one who'd gone barreling into the situation. Now she looked like she felt awkward indeed.

The girl continued drawing busily. "What's this?" Maomao said. The picture seemed to depict some sort of patterned vessel.

“Do you think it’s food?” Yao volunteered.

“I wonder what it’s supposed to signify,” En’en said. The girl tapped the picture with her stick.

“Maybe she’s looking for whatever it is,” Yao said. When En’en communicated the question to the child in her stilted Shaohnese, she was rewarded with a big circle. The girl held out her hand to them. In her palm was a single small piece of gold.

“Whoa, whoa!” Maomao said. There wasn’t much of it, but it was gold. Not the sort of thing to go around showing to just anybody. She pressed the girl’s hand closed again. “I guess she’s got money and wants to go shopping.”

“Sounds right to me,” En’en said.

“Yeah,” Yao agreed.

“But so far we have no idea what she wants to go shopping *for*,” Maomao said. She looked at the picture and asked, <You want a vessel like this?>

The girl shook her head. This would have been easier if she was a better artist. *Maybe at least as good as Chou-u*, Maomao thought. She dismissed the idea. That sort of thinking wasn’t going to get them anywhere. The girl’s picture was actually pretty good, considering how young she was.

“I think it looks like food of some kind. Any clues as to what?” Maomao said. But they weren’t making any headway.

The little girl looked toward the canal, where the children Yao had scattered had started playing down by the water. They were fishing something up—crayfish, Maomao realized. They could be quite tasty if you cleaned the mud off and cooked them. The girl, however, was shaking her head as if to say that crayfish were not her objective.

“I don’t think we can do any more good here. Why don’t we take her back with us? The medical officers speak better Shaohnese than we do,” Maomao said.

“That’s true,” agreed Yao, who was all out of ideas. “Come on, let’s go together,” she said and took the girl’s hand.

The child looked confused, so Maomao explained, <We’ll take you to people who can talk better than us.>

The girl shook her head again. She was obviously eager to communicate something, but with her unable to speak, it just wasn’t getting across. She could only scratch pictures in the dirt.

“Does that look like a steamed bun to you?” En’en said.

“Now that you mention it, it sort of does.”

It was hard to tell; the picture was just kind of a circle. Maomao and the others cocked their heads and peered at it. The girl cocked her head, too, as if she was saying, *You still don’t understand?*

“Maybe it’s a fruit,” Maomao said.

“Yeah, like an apple?” said Yao. It was true that the circle had what looked like a stem and leaf attached to it. The other items sort of looked like fruits and snacks if you thought of them that way.

“Wait...” En’en said. <Do you want a snack?>

The girl waved her arms vigorously. This appeared to be the right answer.

Maomao spread out the cloth bundles, showing the girl the various treats they’d purchased that afternoon. But the child shook her head at each one.

“I think we’ve got pretty much everything you can buy,” Maomao said. Baked treats, steamed treats, sweet things, savory things—it had been a long list. “About the only thing in town we haven’t gotten yet is from that last place on the list.”

She pointed at the shop and the girl began to bounce.

“Huh?” They couldn’t be sure they were on the right track, but they managed to communicate that they were going to go to a shop selling treats. The girl started bouncing even faster. “Does she want us to take her with us?” That seemed to be the message. There was something she wanted at that shop.

Maomao and the rest of the little troop crossed the bridge and headed for the place in question, a folk-house-style building with a sign outside. It was shut up tight, and looked dark and somehow sad. The little girl must not have known that this was the place; she couldn’t read the sign, after all.

“This place sells snacks?” asked a deeply skeptical Yao.

“Strictly speaking, it’s not a snack shop. It’s a pretty...interesting place,” Maomao said.

She opened the door with a clatter. They discovered there was another customer there, along with the pudgy shop owner. The customer seemed to be a woman—but a very tall one, with noticeably tanned skin. Maomao wasn’t good at guessing foreigners’ ages, but she took the woman to be at least in her midthirties.

Is *she a foreigner?* Maomao wondered.

“Jazgul!” the woman said.

Jazgul? Maomao didn’t know what the word meant. The little girl, however, went rushing over to the woman.

<My goodness! Wherever did you go?> the woman asked in Shaohnese. Jazgul, it appeared, was the girl’s name. It seemed much harder to pronounce than a name like Aylin, even though both were from the same language.

“So is that her guardian? Maybe her mother or something?” Maomao said.

“Seems like a safe guess... Even though they don’t look much alike,” En’en said. All three of them felt spent. Is this what all that stress had been for?

Jazgul was communicating something to the woman, pointing at Maomao and the others.

“*Per*haps it is you who saw Jazgul *safely* here?” the woman asked them. She had an accent, but she was perfectly understandable.

“She was by the canal over there. She seemed to want snacks,” Yao said.

“Ah. So that’s what hap*pened*.” In short, Jazgul’s companion had been here, but they’d gotten separated, and the girl hadn’t known which shop was which. Ironic, that it was so close. “I must *apolo*gize. This child was adamant on going out there.”

While the woman chatted, the shopkeeper rifled through the shelves, looking for whatever she had ordered.

“Oh, I know this place,” En’en said when she saw the logo on some wrapping paper. The paper wasn’t very high quality, but it was good enough for its purpose.

“What’s the story?” Maomao said.

“Nothing, really. I just realized this place has dealings with the mansion.” Presumably meaning Yao’s home.

“Here we are. This’s all we’ve got in stock at the moment. That all right?” the shopkeeper said.

“Hngh?!” Yao exclaimed when she saw what he was holding: a bundle of frogs, stretched, dried, and packed together like a little bouquet. Maybe the girl had seen the kids catching crayfish and gotten excited, thinking they were after frogs. Hence her disappointment.

There are so many different kinds *of frogs, though*, Maomao thought. If these were being used for some fancy person’s snack, they wouldn’t be

like a frog you could just pick up off the street. *Frogs*... The word teased at something in a corner of Maomao's memory, a decent-sized thing that one might call a frog. She shook her head. It had been such a shock that it still came unbidden into her mind at times.

"Wh-What are those for?" Yao asked.

Probably a nice, cool summer snack, Maomao thought. The fat on the reproductive organs in certain female frogs that lived out in the countryside was gooey and delicious—as Yao should have known very well. *I guess she's better off being in the dark.*

And there you had it.

"So outlanders really do eat snakes and frogs," Yao whispered to En'en.

"Yes, so it would seem," En'en replied, innocent as a dove.

As far as Maomao was concerned, though, there was a problem with what the "outlanders" were buying at that moment. "Um..." she started. The frogs were one thing, but they'd also bought up the store's supply of pomegranates (candied with rock sugar) and dried figs. "Is it possible we could ask you to leave just a few figs for us?" That was one of the items on their list.

"Oh, I am sorry. How many do you need?" the woman said. Maomao named a quantity, and the woman gladly agreed.

"Figs are in season now. We can get 'em for you whenever you want. Pomegranates... Well, maybe it's a little early yet," the shopkeeper said.

"Thank you very much," the woman said. Jazgul bowed her head politely as well.

Maomao squinted at the woman's purchases. *Kind of wish I could ask about them.* She didn't, though—both because it would be sticking her nose where it might not be welcome, and because she wasn't sure they shared enough language to make the conversation possible.

The woman bundled up her items, then stood in front of Maomao and the others. "Please accept this small token," she said, and held out white pieces of cloth, one for each of them. "For taking such care of Jazgul."

Then the foreign customers left the shop. Maomao touched the fabric—and exclaimed, "Excuse me!"

Before she could pursue the woman, though, the shopkeeper said, "Your items are ready." By the time they had collected their purchases and left the shop, the two foreigners were nowhere to be seen.

"What's got you so worked up?" Yao asked.

“This cloth,” Maomao said, giving it a gentle flap. It looked plain and white, but the corners were worked with elaborate embroidery of grass and trees. “It’s cool to the touch. I would assume it’s silk.”

“Yes, it is. What about it?” Easy for the girl from the lap of luxury to say.

Maomao spread her hands and shook her head in a gesture of exasperation. “Lady Yao. A piece of silk is a very generous reward for something as simple as helping a lost child. At least to us ordinary people.”

“Y-Yes, of course! I knew that.”

All right, Yao was pretty cute. En’en was flashing Maomao a thumbs-up from where Yao couldn’t see.

So these outlanders could buy up a store’s stock and handed out silk like candy. *We’re dealing with some rich folk here.* Maomao sighed, thinking maybe she should have sucked up to them a little more.

At that moment, a bell rang signaling the hour.

“Th-The time!” all three of them exclaimed. It was long past when they were supposed to be back. They ended up running as fast as they could...again.

Chapter 13: Lady-in-Waiting to His Majesty's Younger Brother

For days after their shopping expedition, Maomao found herself doing the same thing day in and day out: washing and disinfecting bandages. The medical assistants were all getting pretty tired of it when a message happened to arrive. Specifically, a message for En'en.

"Just for me?" she asked.

"I wonder what it could possibly be," said a most intrigued Yao, taking a peek. Out of the three of them she was the most *fully developed*, but her behavior, including her bouts of unabashed curiosity, reflected her age more than her looks did.

"It would appear to be notice of a new assignment," En'en said. When they saw what it said, all three of them scowled.

They looked at the physician who had brought the notice. "Well, you all saw it. En'en's going to have other work to do for a while."

En'en scowled hardest of all. "I'm sorry, sir, but I must say I'm loath to be separated from Lady Yao."

"This assignment comes from someone you *don't* say no to," the physician replied. His tone was still friendly, but there was clearly no room for argument.

What was written in this disturbing notice?

"So...she's ordered to serve the Emperor's esteemed younger brother? At least, for a while?" Yao said, taking the paper and reading it over again. So she was going to be babysitting Jinshi.

"May I ask something, sir? Why me? If this is about our exams, Lady Yao achieved better marks than I did."

Yeah, because you deliberately flubbed it, Maomao thought, but she was decent enough to resist the impulse to say it out loud.

"And I hardly think my family background makes me suited to this service," En'en continued. Yao came from good stock, but En'en was a commoner. Normally, one would have expected the royal family's ladies-in-waiting to come from halfway respectable households. Maomao, though, thought she had an inkling as to why En'en had been chosen.

“If anything, I think he’s avoiding ladies whose status is too high,” the doctor said, looking somehow pleased to know this. “Pick someone of high status, and there’s every chance she’ll just be angling to make him her husband.”

Jinshi was twenty, a year older than Maomao, and he looked older still. Certainly a reasonable age to find himself a wife or consort. Indeed, it was starting to seem odd that he hadn’t.

“With that face of his, the wrong person could make his life a living nightmare,” the doctor said.

As Maomao had suspected, then. En’en could be warped in her own particular ways, but she was unstintingly devoted to her mistress. She wouldn’t pull anything outrageous with Jinshi. She was so dedicated to Yao, in fact, that it was written plainly on her face that she had no interest in taking up this position. How rude of her.

“Word is that Maomao was in the running...” The physician glanced outside, where a freak with a monocle was pressed up against the window. Evidently he was back from his hiatus. Everyone seemed to be used to him by now. “...but *some* highly ranked individual insisted she wasn’t fit for the position, so she was dropped from consideration.”

Just as the freak was staring his hardest, two of his subordinates came up from behind and peeled him away from the window, dragging him off. Maomao wished he wouldn’t come back, but she knew better than to hope for more than a few minutes’ respite.

“They want you there tomorrow. I know it’s sudden,” the physician said.

En’en didn’t respond. Even her face remained impassive, but she somehow still managed to give off an aura of absolute disgust with the idea. She glanced at Yao, looking for help, but Yao simply said, “If it’s a matter of family background, there’s not much we can say.” Maomao had thought she might be jealous, but she was surprisingly willing to come around when confronted with that logic. Maybe it was because she knew just how good En’en was at her job. “They could send you just about anywhere, En’en. I hope it goes really well,” she said and flashed the other woman a brilliant smile. Maomao briefly thought that it might be her little way of getting En’en back for leading her around by the nose all the time, but it didn’t seem so. Yao was truly giving her blessing to this personnel transfer, completely oblivious to how En’en felt or what she was hoping for. Classically naive, Yao was.

En’en scowled again. If her mistress had interceded at this moment, it might have saved her, but Yao had simply given her the old *so-long-good-luck*. What else could En’en do?

“Best of luck out there, then,” the physician said, clapping her on the shoulder. En’en gave him a dejected nod.

“It’s a lot busier around here with one less pair of hands,” Yao said as she organized medicine in some drawers. She’d already been talking to Maomao more, and the pace had really picked up now that En’en was gone.

“Definitely,” Maomao said. “En’en worked hard.” She was going through medicines and sorting them into piles. Once in a while they got something unusual, but today it was all just topping off supplies of ordinary drugs.

“I hope she’s okay... I’d like to think she wouldn’t be rude to His Majesty’s younger brother.”

“I’m sure she’s fine.”

“Yeah... You’re right. This is En’en we’re talking about. I’m sure it’s okay.”

What I meant was, he won’t have her executed for being a little rude to him... Maomao had been thinking less about En’en and more about Jinshi’s personality. He was never too eager to punish people. There were times when his hands were tied and he had to do it, but Maomao seriously doubted En’en would do anything awful enough to put herself in that position. *Long as she doesn’t actively try to murder him.*

Maomao, meanwhile, would keep doing her work as normal.

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Jinshi’s office was more populated than usual. He held his paperwork in one hand as he looked at the civil officials, soldiers, and court ladies being introduced to him. Normally, someone of Jinshi’s rank wouldn’t have bothered to meet every single new person who was given a job. It had been his own idea to make sure he saw each of them.

“We’ll be getting quite busy, but I’m confident you’ll work hard,” he said to them and smiled. He wasn’t out to sow goodwill, or even to make his subordinates feel at ease.

Not a single other person there was smiling. To smile at someone could leave the other person with a good impression—but for Jinshi, it could also

be a harbinger of disaster. On his very first day as a “eunuch” in the rear palace, one of the other eunuchs had greeted him with a smile. Gaoshun had looked away for an instant, and Jinshi had found himself dragged into the underbrush. The men around there might have been without their most important possession, but that wasn’t enough to completely rob them of their sex drive. The man had wanted to make Jinshi his toy. Jinshi wasn’t sure how it had started, but it had been clear he was in danger.

“Funny. I never got to where I could look back on that and laugh,” he muttered to himself. He’d punched the eunuch and run, but he’d learned that such relationships weren’t uncommon among the men of the rear palace, who referred to their lovers as “brothers-in-law.” He didn’t want to think about it. Sadly for all involved, Jinshi had no interest in such things.

“Is something the matter, Master Jinshi?” asked Basen, who had at last recovered from his injuries. From what Jinshi heard, he’d continued his daily military training unabated despite his body being in tatters. Gaoshun seemed in disbelief at his own son’s durability.

“It’s nothing,” Jinshi said. The new personnel all appeared to be safe. He’d been somewhat unnerved when he’d heard that they simply *had* to hire a young lady-in-waiting, but so far all seemed well. And now Suiren would stop chiding him every time he was in his room.

He couldn’t be too cautious, especially in light of the recent attempted poisoning. He had to keep a sharp eye on things. Jinshi himself had hoped to bring a certain long-standing acquaintance of his on board, but instead he’d ended up with one of that acquaintance’s colleagues. That is to say, one of the court ladies from the medical office.

Since the position was new, the test had been made particularly difficult, and one by one the women with no aptitude for medicine had been weeded out. That assured him that at least this young woman knew what she was doing.

Everyone would have plenty to do soon enough, what with the prince’s presentation coming up. Jinshi needed to get back to work himself, so he told them to be on their way.

Once the crowd was gone, Jinshi heaved a sigh. Only Basen was in the room with him, and he would let the gesture go.

“Would you like me to prepare a drink for you, Master Jinshi?”

“No, I don’t need anything. What about you? Are you feeling better?”

“I sincerely apologize, sir, but my morning runs are still only two *li*. I’ll

have them back to normal in no time." That sounded like more than enough to Jinshi. He marveled at Basen's physical capacities.

Basen's work had piled up during his absence, and now he was playing catch-up. He had no gift for paperwork, but he was doing his damnedest, which pleased Jinshi.

"Master Jinshi," Basen said, holding up a piece of paper. "What do you wish to do about the Shaoh shrine maiden living in the villa?"

Politics could be a very special kind of pain in the neck. Things that could have been easily communicated orally had to be announced in painstakingly detailed memos. The shrine maiden had arrived at the villa days ago, and *now* the papers about the matter were arriving? As for the shrine maiden, Jinshi had gone to give his formal greetings, but that was all. He'd been under the impression someone else was dealing with the matter, so imagine his surprise when it landed in his lap.

"It's my problem now, is it?" He looked at the mountain of paperwork and sighed again. What else was there to do? Rear palace-related matters were still coming to him, and it seemed to be falling to him (so he felt) to fill the hole left by the absence of the Shi Clan. "Do you suppose they all hate me?" he asked.

"No, sir. If anything, I should think they adore you."

"I wish you wouldn't say that with such a straight face."

"No? I think they all came here out of a genuine desire to meet you, sir."

The worst part was, there wasn't a hint of malice in Basen's voice.

The reason court ladies weren't allowed in his office was that so many of them would "drop" their papers just to have an excuse to drag out their time there. In fact, the occasional male bureaucrat tried the same thing, such that these days, anyone who dropped their papers in Jinshi's office was thereafter barred from entering. Jinshi didn't actually consider it a black mark on the perpetrators, but to outsiders it was impossible not to think that there was something strange going on in there. Some people got the idea that Jinshi's office was a place where the slightest slip would be severely punished.

Despite all of this, the quantity of paperwork never seemed to lessen.

"In any case, the Shaoh shrine maiden. Yes. The physicians haven't yet been to see her, have they?" Jinshi asked.

"No, sir. The plan is for Medical Officer Kan and the new medical assistants to be the ones to examine her."

This woman was a foreign dignitary, a shrine maiden. They couldn't blithely subject her to examination by men, even if she was here for medical treatment. They would send the eunuch Kan Luomen—Maomao's father, Lakan's uncle. The court ladies would be the ones doing the actual examination, with Luomen making the diagnosis based on what they told him. A roundabout method at best.

Roundabout, but necessary. It was what the Shaohnese delegation had asked for. Jinshi had just appropriated one of the medical assistants for himself, leaving only two of them, but at least Maomao would be there. He expected her and Luomen to work well together.

"All right. Find out everyone's schedules and tell the medical office to set up an examination. Ideally, one that accommodates the shrine maiden's needs and availability as much as possible."

"Yes, sir." Basen quickly wrote down the orders and passed them to a messenger who waited outside the office.

"Is there anything else?" Jinshi asked. He wanted to get the weightiest matters out of the way first. The nettlesome annoyances that seemed to keep coming back to haunt him could wait.

"Nothing to speak of, sir. Oh! Except..."

"Yes?"

Basen looked uncomfortable. "We've already received a request for transfer." He held out the written request, which Jinshi took and studied. It was written in a very accomplished hand. It must have come from one of the people he'd met earlier. "A court lady named En'en requests to be transferred back to the medical office."

"She was one of the medical assistants?"

Birds of a feather, as they said. A somewhat unusual job could attract somewhat unusual people. Jinshi wasn't eager to have too many young ladies-in-waiting around him, so once the other women had learned the ropes, he thought it distinctly possible that they would be able to get along with one less person. If this En'en could simply hold out until then, she might very well get her wish.

"On what basis did we hire En'en?" he asked.

"She's diligent about every aspect of her work and excellent at supporting those around her. She's also been a lady-in-waiting since she was ten years old, so she already knows what she's doing in that regard. She's a quick learner, but shows no desire to advance herself in the world—which I suppose is both a strength and a weakness."

“Yes, that does sound promising.”

“She also... Well, this isn’t precisely about her capabilities...” Basen sounded awkward; he couldn’t quite bring himself to look at the paper directly.

“Yes? Out with it.”

“Sir. There’s an additional note here. It’s not that she’s uncomfortable around men or even specifically dislikes them...” He hesitated ever so briefly before saying, “But she’s shown a certain preference for women.”

A preference for women! Meaning she was romantically interested in other women despite being a woman herself.

“She stays!” Jinshi exclaimed, flinging the transfer request aside.

“M-Master Jinshi!”

“She’s the perfect fit. I’m not letting this one get away!”

He was grinning broadly as they went back to work.

Chapter 14: Meeting the Shrine Maiden

Close to Ah-Duo's villa near the court was another, similar building whose main purpose was to house foreign visitors. At the moment, the shrine maiden from Shaoh and her entourage were staying there. That was where Maomao, Yao, Luomen, and several bodyguards went to perform her examination. Maomao recognized the guards—they were eunuchs she knew from the rear palace. With the shrine maiden present, the villa was on some level a place where men were not allowed, hence the emasculated escorts.

"What an odd place," Yao commented. Although it was near the court, it was in the opposite direction from Yao and Maomao's dormitory, so they'd never had a chance to take a good look at it. Maomao had glanced at it a few times when she was going to Ah-Duo's villa, but only now did she see that Yao was right. It did seem strange.

Maybe the style could be characterized as foreign. The architecture didn't seem Shaohnese so much as it seemed to come from somewhere farther west. Maomao had never seen such a building herself, but there had been pictures of one in a book she'd borrowed long ago. The construction used wood and occasionally brick, and the tops of the window frames were in the shape of crescent moons. The use of glass in a few places only emphasized the luxury of the place. The garden contained rose arches that must have been magnificent when the flowers bloomed.

The servants' uniforms were equally striking, although the servants themselves all had dark eyes and hair that suggested they were people from Li. *Guess you can't hire foreigners to attend on a foreign dignitary.* If one of them turned out to be a covert operative, it would be on your head. Maomao was sure that even the mud-covered middle-aged lady tending to the garden had been thoroughly vetted.

They entered the building and were met by a woman whose appearance screamed *foreigner*. She was tall, with light-brown hair, while her eyes were an olive color, straddling the line between light and yellowish green.

"We have *been* waiting for you," she said with the unique Shaohnese lilt. "Please, come *in*side."

She led them within, where they discovered that the interior of the

building was much more elaborate than the exterior. There were flagstones beneath their feet, while many of the stone pillars around the building were decorated with carvings. A number of display pieces stood here and there. They looked imported; if a commoner were to knock one over, they could work their entire lives and never pay it back, Maomao suspected.

As they went deeper and deeper into the building, it got darker and darker. Curtains had been pulled over the windows, blocking the light from outside.

Right. She's albino... That is to say, someone with white hair, pale skin, and red eyes. Some were said to have blue eyes, or a few streaks of gold in their hair, but all of them were sensitive to sunlight. Maomao's old man had told her that albino people lacked the stuff that normally gave people their skin color, so the sun was harsher on them than on most people. To compensate for the blocked windows, there were candles placed along the ground at regular intervals, burning even here in the middle of the day.

"This way, please," the woman said. "I sincerely apologize, but we must ask the men to wait here."

"We understand, of course," Luomen said, and he and the guards stopped at the entryway.

Maomao and Yao proceeded into the room. It was dim and full of the smell of incense. An orange light flickered, revealing a silhouette on a canopied bed.

"I've *brought* them, milady."

A woman who appeared to be an attendant stood by the bed. She had dark skin and looked somehow familiar. Maomao was tilting her head, trying to figure out who it was, when Yao exclaimed, "Oh!"

Maomao gave her a nudge, but at the same moment, she realized why the woman looked so familiar. She was the one who'd been with the young girl, Jazgul, the other day. The embroidered cloth she'd given them as a thank-you had led Maomao to assume she was a rich woman—but she never would have guessed that she was the shrine maiden's attendant.

So the shrine maiden eats frogs too, huh? She'd thought for sure that the shrine maiden avoided meat and fish on the basis that one wasn't supposed to take a life. When she'd heard the woman was sick, Maomao had guessed it might be due to malnutrition from not eating meat, but she seemed to have been wrong about that.

The tanned woman appeared to remember them too, for she looked startled—but only for a moment. She soon collected herself, her face

impassive once more. Maomao and Yao were here on business. None of them could take time for personal reminiscences while they were on official duty.

"If you would," the attendant said, her accent thick. She pulled aside the curtain, revealing a beautiful woman who was indeed albino. She looked young for someone who was supposed to be in her forties. Maomao thought she seemed rather tall, though it was hard to tell while she was lying down. She also had a slight paunch, although her hands were long enough that she didn't look overweight.

If she were a little younger and a little slimmer... Maomao thought. Well, then she would have looked exactly like the foreign woman the painter had spotted. And then there was... *Yes, they do resemble each other.*

Meaning the shrine maiden and the White Lady.

Maomao also had her secret mission, entrusted to her by Lahan. *He wants to know if this "shrine maiden" really has the qualifications to be a shrine maiden, or if...*

Or if her "qualifications" had gone long ago, when she had borne the White Lady.

I'll have to see if there's any sign she's given birth. The quickest way would be to simply peek between her legs, but that was off the table. There was rude and there was *rude*. *There's another way, though.* During pregnancy, the belly expanded rapidly over the course of nine months. It got so big it could almost burst, only to deflate as soon as the child was born. This resulted in stretch marks, which occurred because the skin couldn't always grow fast enough to keep up with the rapid expansion of the belly during pregnancy, causing it to physically break.

Empress Gyokuyou and Consort Lihua both managed to avoid them, though...

Typically, birth resulted in stretch marks. It wasn't a guarantee, but it was one bit of evidence Maomao could use. *I'm hoping she'll at least let me look at her belly.*

Maomao bowed and approached the bed. She and Yao had already discussed their respective responsibilities. Maomao would do the actual examination while Yao took notes. Yao had wanted to do the exam herself, but one of the physicians said that Maomao took more accurate pulses, and Yao had to acquiesce. Even if she hated knowing that she wasn't doing as well as Maomao.

Maomao was starting to understand the many reasons En'en found Yao so adorable. She was almost unbearably earnest and open, and when someone disagreed with her she could be by turns obnoxious and inspiring. Just as she'd accepted Jinshi's selection of En'en as one of his ladies-in-waiting, she was good enough to admit that Maomao outstripped her in medical abilities.

They'd already seen a written report detailing the nature of the shrine maiden's complaint and what treatments had previously been tried. Maomao and her old man had discussed it together and come up with a number of possible diagnoses.

"I'd like to start by taking your pulse, milady, if I may?" Maomao said, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"Please do," the shrine maiden said, holding out her hand. Maomao found it soft to the touch. The pale skin made it easy to see where the veins were. She placed three fingers against the maiden's wrist. She could feel the woman's heartbeat against her fingertips, *ba-bum*, *ba-bum*, *ba-bum*, and she measured how many beats there were in a set period of time. She gestured to Yao, using her fingers to communicate the number, which Yao recorded with a portable writing set.

"Are you feeling nervous? Your pulse is a bit fast," Maomao said.

The question must have escaped the shrine maiden, for she gave Maomao a questioning look. The woman beside them said a few words in Shaohnese, whereupon the shrine maiden smiled and said, "Yes, a little."

The number wasn't abnormal, in any case, so Maomao saw no cause for alarm. She said, "May I touch your face, ma'am? I'd like to examine your eyes and tongue."

"Please, go ahead."

Maomao put her hands on the shrine maiden's cheeks. She had laugh lines, but otherwise her skin was firm and beautiful. Maomao pulled down the skin under the woman's eyes so that she could see the eyeball better. Then she had her open her mouth and stick out her tongue.

We were lucky, in a way, Maomao thought. She was thinking of their encounter with the girl Jazgul the other day. *Pomegranates and hasma...*

The items the attendant had bought that day were medicinal in nature. Yet the report they'd been given hadn't said anything about that—implying the medicine was simply part of the shrine maiden's regular diet. Maomao glanced at the woman standing beside the bed. All her surprise had vanished; now, she looked as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Maybe she wasn't making medicine at all. Maybe it was a complete coincidence.

Taking too much medicine could have a deleterious effect on the body. "Pardon me, but could I trouble you to write down in detail the shrine maiden's favorite foods?" Maomao said.

"Very well," the attendant said. She made some quick notes, but unfortunately they were in Shaohnese. Maomao didn't know all of the words. She would have to translate them later and then consider them. Anyway, it was her father who would give the final diagnosis; she hoped he might be able to read the list better than she could.

"Would you be so kind as to remove your overgarment?"

"Certainly," the shrine maiden said and began to shrug off her clothing. Knowing the exam was coming, she'd gotten sleepwear that closed in the front. Maomao could now clearly see her breasts and belly button.

"May I conduct a physical examination?" Maomao asked.

"Go ahead."

Maomao began to tap on the shrine maiden's body, listening for subtle differences in the sound. Meanwhile, she looked at the woman's belly. *No stretch marks.* The shrine maiden's paunch would have made stretch marks less likely—but there was also the possibility that their entire hypothesis was wrong. That she had never borne a child at all. What would make Maomao think that? *Her breasts are small for the amount of meat on her bones.*

When menarche didn't come, a person could wind up half yin and half yang, neither exactly a man nor exactly a woman. That might explain the size of her chest, but maybe her breasts had simply always been small. It was impossible to know for sure whether the shrine maiden had given birth or not. Whether she was ill and how likewise depended on whether her monthly visitor had ever even come.

Maomao's eyebrow twitched as she conducted the exam; it was frustrating not to know exactly what she was working with. The examination was not making things clearer. And yet, she felt a creeping suspicion. *I must be missing something.* Something was wrong, but she couldn't tell what—and she hadn't figured it out by the time the examination was over.

I wish I could have inspected her bottom half, she thought, but she knew that was too much to ask. Just having gotten a look at the shrine maiden's bare chest was an achievement for her very first exam. Even

some of the consorts in the rear palace resisted the idea of strangers touching them.

"You can put your clothes back on," Maomao said. She knew she was never going to figure it all out in one visit; the world simply didn't work that way. Continuing to press wouldn't get her anywhere. Better to go back and tell her father what she had learned. "I'm going to discuss things with the physician based on what I've seen and heard here," she said.

"*Under*stood," the attendant said, helping the shrine maiden back into her overgarment. Maomao and Yao left the room.

Once they were safely in a carriage and headed home, Yao exclaimed, "G-Gosh, was I nervous!" She suddenly realized she'd spoken aloud and scrambled to look like she hadn't said anything, but it was too late. If En'en had been there, she would have been making an *isn't my mistress cute when she blurts something out* face. But she wasn't there. Instead, Maomao studied Yao closely.

The results of the first examination, in Maomao's mind, could only be called inconclusive. Especially when she couldn't even consult with her father then and there, but had to wait until they left the villa.

There's got to be a better way. The woman had come all the way from a foreign country, taking a whole sea voyage just to get treatment here, so Maomao assumed she believed the doctors in Li could help her. Yet now that she was here, a real doctor wasn't even allowed to look at her.

"How'd it go?" her father asked, but Maomao had a sense that the gentle, pleasant, and endlessly affable man already knew the answer. Hence she dove right in.

"Do you believe the honored shrine maiden is really sick?" she asked.

"What do you mean? She came all the way from Shaoh, didn't she?" Yao said.

"Yes, a long, difficult voyage. I suspect she *is* ill, but I have my doubts about whether it's something she needed to come all the way to Li to cure," Maomao said, careful to speak politely to her father when in Yao's presence.

"And what do you think is the nature of her indisposition?" Luomen asked.

Maomao consulted Yao's notes as she replied. "She reports fatigue and sleeplessness, lack of physical stamina, and weight gain. And one other thing that concerns me more than anything else." The shrine maiden

supposedly had a broken bone that refused to heal, the pinky finger of her left hand. It wasn't a hindrance to her daily life, but it couldn't make things any easier for her.

Maomao concluded: "I think her female *qi* is decreasing, leading to these problems. It's not unusual as women grow older." In fact, it was quite a common ailment when the monthly visitor stopped coming. With the drop in female *qi*, body and mind could both suffer. For one thing, the bones frequently grew fragile. Forty was somewhat young for the visitor to cease arriving, but hardly unheard of. If it had never come to begin with, it might make the shrine maiden that much more prone to such problems.

"I see, I see. All right, let's assume you're correct, Maomao. You know different countries have different ways of treating illnesses. Perhaps they really believed they couldn't help the shrine maiden in Shaoh and sent her to Li instead. Do you have any evidence that it's otherwise?"

"I do." Maomao produced the sheet of paper detailing the shrine maiden's diet. "She wasn't given any medicine specifically for augmenting her female *qi*—but she wouldn't have needed it. The food she's been eating would have been more than enough to compensate."

"You mean all that stuff the woman was buying at the shop?" Yao said, catching on. The attendant had made a substantial number of purchases, including many things that could treat women's health concerns. The shrine maiden knew perfectly well how to treat her own condition, yet she had come all the way to Li. There had to be politics involved.

"May I take it the two of you are of one mind on this?" Luomen asked Yao.

"I don't have as much medical knowledge as Maomao does, but I also saw the honored shrine maiden's attendant buying a lot of medicine the other day, so I have no objections." She looked somewhat pained at having to admit her own ignorance in medical matters. She was willing to be honest about it, though, which had a charm of its own. Maomao was virtually becoming a second En'en.

So she knows it was medicine. Did that mean she was also aware that her hasma snacks were medicinal? Maybe one day Maomao would ask.

Luomen, meanwhile, looked troubled. That was typical for him; at this moment, though, he looked somewhat more troubled than usual. "I would simply remind you of one thing."

"Yes, sir?" Maomao and Yao each said.

"When we do our work, people's lives hang in the balance." Of course,

they both knew that. “However we treat the shrine maiden, we must not risk life and limb doing so.”

“Yes, sir. I should have thought that was obvious...” Yao said, mystified.

“Under no circumstances are the shrine maiden or her people to hear what we just spoke of. We need only find and administer the appropriate treatment.”

Even if it happened to be what those people were already doing.

Yao doesn’t look happy about this. Understandably so. She had to be wondering why they would do the same thing the shrine maiden’s attendant was already doing. Wouldn’t that be tantamount to admitting they were incompetent? *But knowing when to play the fool is an important skill too.*

Her father had said they must not risk “life and limb,” but she suspected he wasn’t referring to the shrine maiden’s so much as their own. With the rank odor of politics floating around, inadvertently telling the truth could indeed put their lives in danger. Perhaps a difficult concept for a young lady still not disabused of her innocence about the world.

If En’en were here, I’m sure she could find a good way to communicate it to Yao... Unfortunately, En’en was away on assignment.

“Say, we’re almost there,” Maomao said to Yao in a bid to change the subject. Getting from the villa to the court took even longer than getting to the medical office once they’d arrived, so it could be a tiring trip. “Once we get to the office, how about we look for some medicine? Something you can only find in our country. If it helps even a little, that should do the trick.”

“Right... Sure,” Yao said. She was smart enough to know that making a fuss just then wouldn’t gain anything. To Maomao’s relief, she did the mature thing and stayed calm.

Once they got back to their office, Luomen immediately went to get the papers in order and make their report. With his permission, Maomao and Yao went to the room where the medicines were kept and started looking for something that might help. They decided to check everything, although they knew some medicines wouldn’t work on account of the shrine maiden’s constitution while others had already been tried.

They took out the medicines one by one, Maomao working from memory while Yao consulted a book. Although they had permission to be

there, they had rather monopolized the medicine storage room. Eventually one of the doctors stuck his head in and snapped, “What’s going on in here? There’s medicine everywhere! What are you looking f—Yikes!”

It was Luomen’s old acquaintance, one of the doctors who had come to consult about the status of Consort Lishu’s virginity. He sometimes paid the medical office a friendly visit.

“Is something the matter? Do any of these combinations concern you?” Maomao asked, peering at him.

“Er, no, I just thought... For a second I was afraid...that they were sending me back *there*.”

“Where?”

“You know, *there*.” The man pointed to the northern quarter of the court. “The rear palace!”

“What would make you think that? I grant these are all treatments for women’s health concerns, but this has nothing to do with the rear palace.” Maomao let her eyes drift over the assembled medicines.

“Ah, women’s complaints... Yes, I see. It’s just that I mostly deal with men here at court. When I saw these particular ingredients laid out, I panicked a little.”

The man seemed to have some sort of traumatic memory of the rear palace. It reminded Maomao that in the past, doctors who weren’t eunuchs had been permitted to come and go there. “That’s right, you were a physician at the rear palace some time ago, weren’t you? I’ve heard,” Maomao said. “Did something happen there?”

“Nothing much. Just a bad memory. You take this, and this, and some of these...” He began plucking ingredients out of Maomao and Yao’s collection. “Mix them together, and they become a special fake-eunuch medicine.”

“Fake-eunuch medicine?” Maomao and Yao asked in unison.

“It’s a fairly straightforward matter. Sometimes a man who isn’t a eunuch needs to enter the rear palace, but that can lead to...problems. They didn’t force you to become a eunuch, but they made you take this medicine, which suppresses male functions.”

“Ahh.” Now Maomao understood. She’d always wondered how it was that Gaoshun had gone in and out of the rear palace with no problems. (Jinshi was another matter.) He’d probably been taking this medicine. “I admit, it looks like it would taste rather unpleasant.”

“The worst.” The doctor was clearly speaking from experience. “And it

can start to have strange side effects as you become accustomed to it."

"I knew it must have side effects!"

"Goodness, does it. Any medicine taken to excess can be harmful. That's why I worried when I saw that stuff."

It was clear enough why he had been so disturbed. Maomao wanted to ask him exactly what the side effects were, but the man showed himself out of the room before she could get the words out.

"I feel like En'en would know what to do in this situation," Yao said.

"I agree. It is sort of her forte."

"What with all this talk of side effects... Do you think we should write a letter to her and ask for her opinion?"

"I think that's an excellent idea. And En'en would be happy to hear from you." She was probably on the verge of going through withdrawal from young mistress deficiency. Her absence, though, had gotten Maomao and Yao to talk more, so that was some compensation.

Maomao's thoughts wandered back to what combination of medicines they should use.

Chapter 15: “Mom”

They went to examine the shrine maiden several more times. On the way home from one such visit, the scene outside the carriage looked as lively as a New Year’s celebration.

“It almost would have been faster to walk,” Yao said. Maomao, who knew her father had a bad leg, stayed quiet.

Luomen smiled awkwardly. “My apologies. I can’t go too far on this leg, you see.” Yao looked mortified, but it was too late. She was lucky it had been Luomen. He would take her slip in good humor; any other important personage might well have been offended.

It wasn’t clear yet if there was much point to the examinations they were conducting, but the little crew had at least been able to be of some help. Not Maomao’s medicinal selections, sadly, but rather in terms of life advice. They’d been able to tell the shrine maiden to make sure she drank plenty of water. In Shaoh, water was too precious to drink much of. Besides, the shrine maiden couldn’t exactly excuse herself to use the facilities just any old time, so she wasn’t in the habit of drinking water frequently. When she started to get more fluids, she happily reported that she was having fewer headaches.

She was also pleased, she mentioned in passing, to be able to take more walks. As an albino, she’d only been able to go out at night in Shaoh, but the sunlight was less intense and rain more frequent in Li. During spells of bad weather, she would get an umbrella and take a constitutional.

I guess I’m glad she’s enjoying herself, Maomao thought, but she was almost beginning to wonder if the shrine maiden had come to Li for a simple vacation.

Not that the woman had nothing to fill her hours, of course. She received occasional visitors. Some of them were important people, but there were also those who simply wanted to exchange a few words with the foreign shrine maiden “for the experience.” Much like the White Lady before her, this foreign shrine maiden seemed to attract people intrigued by the color of her skin.

“She said someone who visited her today wanted their fortune told,” Maomao said.

“Prognostication certainly is something a shrine maiden sometimes does, but it’s a bit of a rude request. She is, after all, a foreign dignitary,” Luomen said. Maomao agreed entirely. Not to mention that, publicly at least, she was here for medical treatment. Going to someone in that position and asking them to tell your fortune smacked of a certain lack of empathy, but sadly, many people seemed to be that way.

“They say her fortunes are accurate, but I question living your life based on things like that—letting baseless predictions dictate your future,” Maomao said. That was what bothered her. There was no reason to believe fortune-telling worked. If the shrine maiden’s predictions had any validity at all, it probably just showed that she had a gift for reading people.

“I know you prefer things to be clear-cut, Maomao,” Luomen said.

“You don’t like fortune-telling?” Yao broke in.

“Doesn’t it make you feel funny?” Maomao asked. She knew not everything in the world was black and white, but in her view, most of life’s “mysteries” simply represented a limitation of one’s own knowledge or information. There was always something *real* behind them. “I mean, scorching tortoise shells and letting that tell you where to locate your capital city? Pretty dubious method.”

“I daresay it’s surprisingly rational, in fact,” her father countered. “Using parts of the local wildlife can give you a sense of how well the animals are eating. In other words, whether the land is abundant. Call it fortune-telling, attribute it to the gods or an immortal—if that’s what it takes to get people to believe it. Perhaps that’s where what we call politics began.”

I see, Maomao thought. She could accept that. Yao was likewise listening intently.

“There’s only one problem. A ritual might have meant something when it was first performed, but if you forget *why* it began or lose the knowledge of what it means, only the form remains. That, girls, is dangerous.” Luomen looked sad. “I once went to a village where, when there was a bad harvest, they would sacrifice all the infants born that year, burying them in the ground. But one year that failed to improve the crop, so they made more sacrifices, until there was hardly anyone left in the village. That was when I happened to pass through the place on my travels.”

I think I see where this is going. Her father had known much hardship, and by this point in the story, Maomao had a good idea of what he was getting at.

“When they tied me up and threw me in a hole, I thought for sure I was going to die. My good luck that my traveling companion showed up a little later and found me, or I might be nourishing the worms there to this very day.”

Yao was speechless at the composure with which Luomen conveyed this grim tale. As perceptive as he was, he was a bit numb to stories of his own misfortune. (Suffice to say he hadn’t *chosen* to become a eunuch.)

“We might regard human sacrifice as absurd, but sometime in the past it was effective. In this particular village, they had a habit of planting the same crop in the fields each year. They used fertilizer, but there was a nutrient missing—something produced in the human body.”

That logic, of course, only held if monocropping was the actual problem. When Maomao’s father had visited the village, though, an insect-borne disease had been the cause of the poor harvest; the sacrifices had been entirely in vain.

“Sometimes people continue to do things simply because they worked in the past. Take a place that promotes good harvests with human sacrifices—the harvest happens to improve because the sacrifices were buried in bare earth. Over time, however, the gods or immortals come into it and it becomes a ritual. The divine is a powerful and convenient excuse.”

Perhaps the shrine maiden of Shaoh had become sacred through a similar process.

Their chat brought them to the door of the medical office. Maomao would have liked to hear more from her father, but that would be all for now. She helped him out of the carriage. There were reports to write. Always reports.

They discovered quite a commotion as they entered the office. What was going on?

“Thank goodness you’re here!” said a doctor who came over to them looking very distressed.

“What’s the matter?” Luomen asked.

“What’s the matter? *What’s the matter?!* I can’t believe he would show up when you were both out. We told him you weren’t here, but he insisted he would wait until you got back! We didn’t know what to do!”

Maomao and her father looked at each other. There was a short list of people who could cause consternation like this.

“I guess I’d better handle this,” Luomen said and walked into the

medical office. Inside, no surprise, was the monocled freak, reclining on a couch he'd had brought for himself.

"Uncle! I thought you'd never get here!" the freak said, grinning.

"Come now, Lakan! We've talked about bringing your furniture into people's offices uninvited. As well as throwing your snack wrappers on the floor—they belong in the trash can. And don't come crying to me if your teeth rot from drinking nothing but juice! You aren't drinking straight from the container, are you?" Luomen bent over and began picking up wrappers.

"H-He looks like an old grandma," said Yao, and even those in the office not of refined upbringing probably agreed with her.

The apprentice physicians and the freak's subordinates scampered to join Luomen at his task. Maomao should probably have helped, too, but if she got anywhere near them the commotion would just start again. Not to mention she simply didn't feel like it. Instead, she observed from behind a post.

"Uncle! Where's Maomao? She's close, isn't she!" the freak said, his nose twitching like a dog's.

Maomao couldn't stop herself from mumbling, "Ugh..."

"Maybe you could do something about your...your face, Maomao? It's *terrifying*," Yao said. If she said so, then. Maomao massaged her mouth and eyebrows until they relaxed somewhat. She couldn't keep her cheeks from twitching, though.

"Maomao! Give me Maomao!" the freak was shouting.

"Come on, now. I warned you that if you made a fuss there would be lots of carrots in your dinner. It's carrot congee tonight," Luomen said. If people didn't think he seemed like an old lady already, they would now. Several people were holding their stomachs, overcome with mirth. The rest were looking around, not knowing what to do.

"I want egg in my congee, Uncle! I mean—no! Where's Maomao? I have a legitimate reason to be here today!"

"That's somewhat hard to believe, with you lying around on a couch you brought yourself, getting snack debris everywhere," Luomen said. He opened a drawer, took out a toothbrush, and gave it to the freak strategist. The message seemed to be: *brush your teeth.* "You can start by telling me what your 'reason' is. I know you lose all sense of proportion when it comes to Maomao. If I agree with why you're here, we can go from there."

The strategist, shoving the toothbrush in his mouth, nodded eagerly.

Maomao picked up a basket of used bandages in the hallway. She trusted her father to handle things. If she was lucky, the two of them would finish their little chat while she was still doing the laundry.

It was perhaps an hour later, when she'd gotten through the washing and was beginning to hang the bandages to dry, that they called for her. Her father arrived looking tired.

"What did he want?" asked not Maomao, but Yao.

"Something rather surprising, I must say," Luomen replied.

"Yes?"

"The prince's presentation will be soon, and Lakan wants Maomao to be his food taster at the dinner."

Does he really plan to be there? Maomao thought. Lahan claimed there was hardly a garden party or get-together that the strategist bothered to attend. That included, she was given to understand, the last Imperial garden party she'd been a food taster at.

"*Why?*" Maomao asked. She knew perfectly well that there must be plenty of people out there with grudges against him, so that explained the need. But to think that he would ask for her personally! Not that he seemed to object whenever anyone else asked Maomao to check their food for poison.

"If he'd asked for you to be his lady-in-waiting, that might be one thing, but a food taster? That's a harder request to turn down. No one is going to object to him having his own taster, particularly after the incident with the food poisoning. How would you like to handle this?"

"Is that really a question?" Maomao said. When her father said the request was "hard to turn down," it was as good as telling her they couldn't say no. Her old man had always been a soft touch, anyway. After what had just happened, people had started calling him "Mom," not that it mattered to Maomao. Not that it mattered at all.

"May I ask something?" Yao said, raising her hand. Luomen nodded. "Weren't Maomao and I supposed to attend the shrine maiden at the banquet?"

"Yes, that was the intention. She'll have to get by with only one of you." Whether that would be Maomao or Yao had yet to be determined. The shrine maiden was to have two food tasters, one from Shaoh and another from Li; given her status and all the attendants, guards, and others around her, the one from Li was fortunate simply to be able to be

anywhere near her.

“All right. You go with him, then, Maomao. It’ll be simplest if I take care of the shrine maiden.”

Yao was firm, but Maomao said, “H-Hold on, don’t I have a say in this?” She was, frankly, frightened of what En’en might do if she let Yao taste food for poison. Besides, she wanted to do it.

“He asked for you specifically, so I think you should accept. Anyway, just think of what would happen if you attended the shrine maiden and Grand Commandant Kan was lurking around.”

To that, Maomao could say nothing. Her father was silent as well. The strategist’s impetuous behavior was, for the most part, politely ignored by his compatriots, but they wouldn’t want him acting like that around a foreign dignitary. Especially one whom not even castrated men were allowed to come into contact with.

“Maomao...” Luomen said, patting her shoulder.

“You can leave the shrine maiden to me,” Yao said, patting the other shoulder.

“A-Are you sure we can’t reconsider?” Maomao asked, waving her hands and looking at them.

“I’m afraid we simply can’t refuse this request, Maomao. Considering the implications for the shrine maiden, you have to attend Lakan. We wouldn’t want an international incident.”

“C-C’mon, pops, you *must* still have a trick up your sleeve...”

Giving her another pat on the shoulder, Luomen said, “I’m afraid not.”

Chapter 16: The Dinner

Time does not always flow at the same rate. Pleasant times are all too brief, while difficult stretches drag on and on. The days before the banquet went as quick as a flash, for time is likewise swift when something unpleasant looms.

Maomao was emphatic that until the day of the event, she didn't want to go to the strategist's place unless absolutely necessary. Yao, meanwhile, was positively excited to have been entrusted to handle a job all by herself. She stayed at the shrine maiden's villa for several days prior to the banquet, as requested by the shrine maiden herself, in order to get familiar with the kind of food she ate on a daily basis. Although the particulars of her diet had been carefully enumerated and reviewed, the woman wanted to be sure there would be no mistakes.

Maomao had been keen to sample the foreign food. She placed the blame squarely on the freak strategist for making her miss this chance.

Yao had never been a food taster before, so before she moved to the villa Maomao showed her the ropes. Yao was an eager student, taking plenty of notes. Maomao was confident she had gotten it all.

On the day of the banquet, they had to report for work an hour earlier than usual. *Ugh. I don't want to do this.* How many times had Maomao had that thought? She'd lost count. She forced herself to change clothes, leaving her room only at the last possible moment. Even then, she didn't go out of her way to look enthused about it.

"Oh, Maomao."

"Well! Haven't seen you for a while."

Who should she meet in the hallway but En'en? The other woman hadn't been sleeping in their dormitory since being assigned as Jinshi's lady-in-waiting, but had a different place to stay. She was clearly fatigued, however, her gaze vacant, her lips dry. She swayed slightly as she walked, like a ghost.

Suffering from a lack of Yao? Maomao wondered.

"Maomao... Where's the young mistress?"

"Oh, uh, Yao? She's not here..."

At the news, En'en looked like a star had fallen out of the sky and hit

her clean on the head. She stumbled over and leaned against the wall, gradually sliding down to the floor. She looked like she was melting, or like a snail that had been sprinkled with salt.

"Are you all right?" said Maomao. She clearly wasn't, but it seemed polite to ask.

"Y-Young mistress..." was all En'en said.

She really is smitten. Maomao poked En'en a couple of times, unsure what to do. She didn't want to go to work, but being late for personal reasons wouldn't look good, so she couldn't hang around here forever. "What are you up to? Don't you have to work? I'm assuming you're supposed to be with a certain someone all day today."

En'en made a gurgling sound. "This was the only chance I had to slip away. The Moon Prince has a chief lady-in-waiting with eyes in the back of her head..."

"Ahh." Maomao could sympathize.

The "Moon Prince" was Jinshi—he had a name, but as the Emperor's younger brother, more or less only other members of the Imperial family were permitted to use it. Everyone else called him by a sobriquet. As for his chief lady-in-waiting, she was an aging woman named Suiren, and she *was* a taskmaster. Even En'en couldn't get away from her.

"Won't she be angry if you don't hurry back?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right... It's okay. I just wanted to be able to smell her from up close. To put up her hair properly. I just don't *want* to do some guy's hair, even if it is smooth and silken."

So Jinshi is "some guy," huh? Yet further testament to En'en's devotion to her mistress. If En'en was being trusted to do Jinshi's hair, though, that meant Suiren must like her a lot. As a point of interest, once Maomao had gotten settled in Jinshi's service, she had been asked to do his hair on several occasions but had always refused on the grounds that she had never done such a thing before.

En'en heaved herself to her feet. She was still swaying as she began to walk away. Then she turned back toward Maomao as if she'd remembered something. "I never got to give you my answer to your letter...because of you-know-who."

Send too many letters and they might start to think you were a spy. Being here like this was plenty suspicious already; if anyone started asking questions, Maomao would have to testify on En'en's behalf.

"Thank you for taking the trouble," Maomao said, accepting the letter

from En’en. (This was the reply to the letter asking about how to deal with the shrine maiden’s condition, as En’en had seemed likely to have a good idea how to treat women’s illnesses.)

Maomao opened the letter to find her response was quite detailed. It mostly described treatments she was already familiar with, but also a few applications that surprised her. She was impressed.

Then she noticed one line in the middle of the letter. “Hey, this here...” She caught hold of En’en, who was once again stumbling her way back to work. “This part about hasma, is this true?”

After a second, En’en said, “Yes, it is.”

“And you still let Yao eat it?” (Yes, Maomao knew it was supposed to make a woman *bigger*.)

“I want Lady Yao to be beautiful,” En’en said. For a second the glow returned to her face, but she soon looked dead inside once more.

Maomao headed off to her own assignment, now with fresh pangs of sympathy for Yao.

Maomao didn’t know exactly what would happen prior to the dinner. There was going to be some kind of ceremony, but it had a lot of steps, and to be perfectly honest, she didn’t know what they all were. It took place in a separate area where only those directly involved were allowed. Maomao and others in her position simply had to wait, and she was most annoyed to have had to report for work an hour early if they were only going to make her stand around.

She considered going to gaze at the cabinets full of medicine, but then one of the doctors called for her. To her dismay, he needed a go-between.

“Take this over to the consorts,” he said. Banquets, garden parties, and similar events were some of the few opportunities the flowers of the rear palace had to go outside. It would be inappropriate to send a man as a messenger—and without Yao or En’en around, there was no one to go but Maomao.

When she looked at what she’d been given, she discovered sticks of incense. The medical office kept them on hand because, in fact, they had medicinal applications. The smoke helped keep bugs at bay, while the aroma had a calming effect on people.

“They want it to keep the mosquitoes away. The normal stuff was too smoky, I guess,” the doctor said. Normally, incense would be much too luxurious to use simply to stop some insects; it was typical to burn tree

branches that had insect-repellent qualities. Even ordinary smoke would help somewhat, but it would certainly be, well, smoky.

"I wonder which august lady could have made such a demand," Maomao said.

"Ahh, it was the new one. You know, the foreigner."

That surprised Maomao somewhat. *We haven't made a proper report to her yet*—about the shrine maiden's secret. *Did she really bear a baby girl?* It seemed she might go home before they ever learned the truth.

"Being from Shaoh, I guess it doesn't matter if she's new here. She gets to be at the banquet anyway. Whatever, give some of the incense to all the consorts, and make sure you do it in the right order." The doctor gave Maomao a list of all the consorts in attendance and showed her a map of where they each were in their building. Empress Gyokuyou was in attendance, of course, as was High Consort Lihua. Aylin was one of three middle consorts present. Scary company if you made a mistake about the proper order in which to distribute the incense.

I have to say, though, Shaoh's power politics don't make much sense to me, Maomao thought as she went on her errand. *Aylin's a political refugee, and Ayla is her political enemy, yet Aylin wants to get leverage over the shrine maiden in order to force the shrine maiden to help her.* That, at least, was Maomao's best understanding of the situation. She was curious, but she knew that sticking her nose in was a good way to lose her head. The most she could do was stay quiet, listen carefully, and try to bail out if things started to get too dangerous.

Each of the consorts had been given her own room in which to rest and prepare. Only Empress Gyokuyou was waiting in an entirely different place. Maomao surmised that it would be proper to give the incense to Consort Lihua first, but she seemed likely to want to have a long conversation. Instead, Maomao waited outside Lihua's room for any ladies-in-waiting she knew to go by. Lihua's less helpful ladies had all been let go, but the ones who were left still looked at Maomao with a distinct fear in their eyes, and she wished they would stop.

So she distributed the incense one person after another until she arrived at Aylin's room. There, she took a sniff. *That's odd.* Even from outside, she could already smell incense within. She knocked on the door.

"Please, *come* in," said Aylin. Her voice was unmistakable. Maomao opened the door to discover she was alone, with no ladies or attendants. She was pressing something to her chest. As Maomao got closer, the smell

grew somewhat more noticeable.

"I've brought your mosquito repellent," she said.

"My thanks. Would you be so kind as to leave it there? My lady-in-waiting just stepped out."

Needed to use the toilet, perhaps? The consort's lady was there as much to watch her as to wait on her, but she must have thought it was safe to leave Aylin alone for a moment. The room had a single small window and only one door, and there was a guard outside.

"I'll be on my way, then," Maomao said, and was about to leave when Aylin took her sleeve. "Y-Yes?" said Maomao.

"You've been to see the honored shrine maiden, haven't you? How *does* she look?"

Hoo boy. How am I supposed to answer that? Maomao thought, but it only took her a second to decide to simply tell the truth. "She shows no sign of fatigue from her journey. As for her illness, we're examining her as thoroughly as we can. You need not worry yourself on that account."

It was such a banal answer that even Maomao could have chuckled. The consort might act solicitous, but Maomao knew perfectly well that she was trying to put her finger on the shrine maiden's weakness. *She's a fine actor.* If Maomao hadn't been privy to Aylin's secret request, she might well have been convinced that the woman was really worried. *Her pallor isn't very good...*

"Is it possible you're feeling indisposed yourself, milady?" Maomao asked. She hadn't quite meant to. It was an occupational hazard.

Aylin's eyes widened. "*Good*ness, do I look ill? I admit I've been somewhat nerv*ous* with this banquet coming."

"If you've no particular complaint, well and good," Maomao said. She had no reason to press further.

"Yes. All's well," Aylin said, but she almost seemed to be talking to herself, and there was a distant look in her eyes. Only for a second, though; she quickly focused again on Maomao. "Thank you. I'd heard that among all the court ladies, you were ex*cep*tional. I hope for much from you."

No pressure, then. Aylin leaned forward, and the smell grew stronger again.

Seriously, what is *that?* Maomao wondered. She was still wondering as she left Aylin's room. *That clinging scent...*

The smell wasn't the only thing that seemed to hang in the air.

Questions about Shaoh nagged at her. She thought she had several of the clues she needed, but it wasn't enough yet to reach an answer. There were still a few more pieces of this puzzle to be found.

I'm sure my old man would have figured it out ages ago. She sighed in dismay at her own inexperience and made her way back to the medical office.

In theory, a formal dinner should be a pleasant activity passed in ease and relaxation. Not so in high society.

The middle of the room was dominated by a single long table with chairs along either side and another table at the head. The Emperor and Empress sat at the far end, along with Jinshi and the shrine maiden, their invited guest. She wore a veil to protect her from the sun.

There were dignitaries from other countries attending the formal dinner as well, but most of them were from vassal states, and they were treated like it. Most of the rest of the crowd lined the long table. Seating order was much the same as it had been at the garden parties, the difference being that this time they were indoors and had chairs to sit on.

Maomao stood by the wall, making an *I hope this will be over soon* face. She could see that most of the food tasters were attending the Emperor, the guests, and the consorts. The *really* important people.

He *doesn't need his own food taster*, she thought, watching the freak strategist from behind and resisting the urge to vomit. He was of medium build, slightly hunched. Other than his monocle, he was a plain man with little to distinguish him from anyone else you might meet. Strange to think he was a commander of the nation's army.

For the most part, even that title was as much honorary as anything. His official station was Grand Commandant, but Maomao didn't know what that entailed. All she knew was that his seat indicated that it was a position of quite high status indeed.

If he thought he'd need a food taster, why did he even bother to come?

The faces of those around the strategist suggested they were thinking the same thing. For when the old fart got bored, he would distract himself by playing little pranks on people nearby. That was why no one complained when he missed garden parties and other important functions; having him there was no better.

The freak appeared to get bored very quickly on this occasion and started whispering to the man beside him, who looked like a soldier.

Maomao glowered at him and tugged on a cloth she was holding. The cloth was attached to a string which was tied around the freak's ankle. Each time she pulled on it, he flinched in his seat. He would look back, an expression of bliss would cross his face, and he would sit up straight again. Maomao had heard of leading someone around by the nose, but leading them around by the ankle—that was new to her.

It made her skin crawl to have him keep glancing at her, but that was how the game was going to be played today. Lahan, the skinflint, hadn't wanted to pay for someone else to babysit the strategist at the formal dinner; he told Maomao to do it on top of her food tasting duties. Not that she cared what *he* wanted, but her old man had added his personal request, and even said he would give her some unusual medicine in exchange, something from abroad.

So it was that they had ended up putting a string on the freak's ankle like mice putting a bell on a cat. Maomao couldn't shake the sense that people were giving them strange looks, but she contented herself with the assumption that the looks were for the freak. Since nobody was audacious enough to say anything, she didn't let it bother her.

Somehow, food is never actually the first order of business at a formal dinner. Other things always have to happen before you can eat. Unlike the outdoor garden party, there were no wild sword dances, but they did get to hear some nice music. It sounded vaguely "foreign." Maybe the musicians were trying to make the performance sound Shaohnese.

"This song was written about the shrine maiden," she was informed by Lahan, who sidled up to her. "Consort Aylin wrote it herself. With a modicum of help from a professional songwriter, but still. Not a bad piece of work."

"The consort wrote this?" Maomao said and glanced toward Aylin. The foreign woman sat among the other middle consorts, smiling as she listened to the music.

"I know things may be complicated between them now, but I believe the consort is grateful to the shrine maiden," Lahan said. "Consort Aylin says that when she was an apprentice, the shrine maiden ensured she received a proper education. You may know some women in Shaoh find themselves married off even earlier than they do here."

Yes, Maomao had heard something like that, rumors that the people of the sand sometimes took brides who were barely ten years old.

"And a girl with no education can't even run away from the marriage

she's sent into."

"True enough."

It happened in Li as well: women unable to escape their husbands, no matter how cruel they were, for if they left their marriages, there would be no work that they could do. Eventually someone would hoodwink them and sell them to a brothel.

Maomao believed ignorance was a sin. Yet she knew that knowledge wasn't given equally to all. If her old man hadn't educated her himself, she would have wound up serving patrons in the Verdigris House. Likewise, Aylin had received an education from the shrine maiden. She could have simply viewed it as her due, but instead she was grateful for it. *And she still finds herself trying to exploit the shrine maiden's weaknesses. I guess gratitude doesn't make the world any less cruel.* Maomao sighed.

It appeared the strategist had no interest in the music, for he had pulled a book about Go from the folds of his robe and started reading. Maomao tugged the string again. He would be lucky if the Emperor didn't see fit to put the next string around his neck.

Then some self-important person gave a self-important speech, and finally the food started. En'en stood just behind Jinshi. He might have wished Suiren were attending him instead, but this was probably her doing: she'd seen that most of the ladies-in-waiting were young things, and taken that as her cue to let En'en do the job.

At least it means En'en's getting along all right, Maomao thought. She couldn't pretend to be completely disinterested. En'en, meanwhile, kept stealing glances to one side—specifically, the side on which the shrine maiden sat. For as Jinshi had En'en to attend him, the shrine maiden had Yao. Yao looked pale. Nerves, maybe.

The sight of Yao somewhat brightened En'en's deathly pallor of that morning, but she still needed more of her young mistress. She was looking around, clearly hoping the formal dinner would end soon. She was worried about Yao's bad color.

Maomao couldn't help being amused by the thought that they'd tested and trained to become medical assistants, yet all three of them were standing here as food tasters, a station normally occupied by the lowborn and the expendable. Yao at least was from better stock than that; Maomao was surprised—one might even say worried—that her parents hadn't interceded to prevent this assignment.

At least I got to teach her the basics, she thought. No matter how well

you knew what you were doing, though, things could and eventually would go pear-shaped as a food taster. A new poison would show up, or you'd ingest some slow-acting toxin. *I guess everyone goes when it's their time.* It was as simple as that. If Maomao was going to die, she hoped she could do it sampling some new kind of poison. Especially if she lasted long enough to savor its effects before expiring. Maybe that was being greedy. But a girl could dream.

The first course arrived. Maomao took the small plate with the food taster's sample on it. She could feel the strategist watching her. She just hoped the tasting would be uneventful so they could get on with the meal.

They did indeed get on with things, and the formal dinner was soon over. Next would be the banquet. This perplexed and annoyed Maomao, who had no idea what the difference was. The latter evidently meant moving somewhere else and involved fewer people. Yao and En'en would be on duty again, but Maomao was done for the day. An excellent reason to leave the room and divest herself of her strategist.

As she was about to do just that, though, there was a crash. She turned to discover a court lady collapsed on the ground. It was Yao.

“Mistress!” En’en cried, diving for her. She tried to prop Yao up. Maomao threw her string away and went over. Yao was pitched forward, the floor covered with vomit. Other court ladies nearby started screaming. Someone was shrieking about the insolence of retching in front of so many extremely important people. Which was to say, someone was not seeing the real problem here.

“Mistress! Mistress!” En’en yelled, shaking Yao’s shoulders and slapping her cheeks.

“Make sure none of it is still in her mouth!” Maomao commanded. “If it lodges in her throat, she could suffocate!”

“Right,” said En’en, getting herself under control enough to plunge a finger into Yao’s mouth. The other woman appeared to be breathing, but she was trembling and holding her stomach, and her pupils were dilated.

If Yao’s collapsed... Then what had happened to the shrine maiden? A crowd had already formed around her. The other woman who had been on tasting duty for her with Yao was white as a sheet and not looking very steady on her feet. She moved away, her hands pressed to her mouth, and the shrine maiden left as well.

So they were poisoned too. Maomao laid a blanket over the trembling Yao. En’en kept wailing “Mistress, Mistress!” She was as pale as any of the poisoned women. “Water! Saltwater! And... And...!”

Maomao pulled En’en off of Yao. They didn’t know what kind of poison they were dealing with, so the best they could do was to try to empty the contents of her stomach. Maomao shoved a finger down Yao’s throat, trying to induce further vomiting, but then an old man hobbled up. “Maomao, En’en. Let me handle this.”

It was *her* old man, carrying a carafe and a bucket. He also had another blanket, which he used to support Yao’s hips. If there was stomach pain and vomiting, there was a good chance diarrhea would be present as well. The blanket was his little kindness, a way of making it less obvious if she fouled herself.

“You need to tend to the shrine maiden,” Luomen said. “I can take care of Yao.” He tugged on the string Maomao had abandoned, drawing the attention of the freak strategist, who’d been simply standing. “Bring me some charcoal, would you? Powdered in a mortar, if possible. And get some rooms ready, somewhere we can examine these young ladies and the shrine maiden. I trust you can do that much, Lakan.”

“Yes, of course, Uncle. I’ll prepare them right away.” It was the

strategist who answered, but it was his subordinates who jumped into action. It was faster to have the strategist give the orders than Luomen trying to get people to listen to him himself.

"Take care of Yao, Pops," Maomao said, and then she made her way over to the shrine maiden.

Chapter 17: The Suspect

The shrine maiden and the other women were quickly moved to their sickrooms. The shrine maiden and the second food taster were vomiting copiously. It was crucial to give them saltwater to make sure their stomachs were completely empty, and they were also given powdered charcoal and laxatives. Not the most pleasant-tasting stuff, but necessary to clear them out.

Maomao's father still couldn't examine the shrine maiden, so the responsibility fell to Maomao. Not only did she want everything out of their stomachs, she wanted to clear the guts as well. If the laxatives didn't work, she was prepared to put medicine directly into their anuses in order to induce the purging she needed, but she doubted either of them was eager for that. Thankfully the laxatives did their job.

Both the shrine maiden and the second food taster were in a better way than Yao. Symptoms of poisoning they might have, but at least they were still conscious. Yao was in dire shape, and En'en, entirely forgetting whom she supposedly served now, was with her constantly. Jinshi wasn't a monster. Maomao assumed he would let En'en be.

The day after the banquet, when the shrine maiden's condition had stabilized somewhat, Jinshi paid Maomao a visit. He was dressed even more plainly than usual, but his sparkliness remained. The now-recovered Basen was with him. Maomao was still wearing her outfit from the day before; she hadn't even had a chance to bathe. This, however, was not the time to worry about such things.

"How is the shrine maiden?" Jinshi asked.

"Calmer. Her case wasn't as serious as Yao's or the other woman who was tasting her food." One of the apprentice physicians was reporting every detail of Yao's progress to her, and she in turn told him how the shrine maiden was faring. If anything happened to the maiden, it could become an international incident. They couldn't allow things to get any worse. No doubt the same concern was what had brought Jinshi here so promptly.

"Yao—yes, that was her name. The one En'en refers to as her mistress."

“You seem to have grown quite fond of En’en, but perhaps you could give her back to us one of these days? I’m afraid she may die from lack of Yao.”

En’en must have been beside herself with Yao in such a state. As for Maomao, she was feeling composed enough by now to crack a joke. Gallows humor? Maybe. Impertinent? Some might say. But that was how you got by.

“You’re not worried about your colleague?”

“I’m worried. I’m not that cold-blooded. But my job at this moment is to care for the shrine maiden. Besides, my father is looking after Yao.” Maomao had faith he would find a way to help her. And En’en knew a thing or two about medicine, so if she kept herself together she could be a pretty effective nurse. No need for Maomao to bring more work on herself. In any case, Li’s international relations rode on the shrine maiden’s health. It was paramount that nothing happen to her.

“If I may ask, did they figure out who poisoned the shrine maiden?” No one but the maiden and those with her had gotten ill, which meant that even if the women survived, it remained a clear attempt on the shrine maiden’s life. The sooner they could find and punish the culprit, the better.

Jinshi looked pained, then he glanced at Basen. The other man made a rather odd expression himself, but took something wrapped in cloth from the folds of his robes. It turned out to be a small bottle. Maomao opened the lid to discover some kind of powder.

“What’s this?” she asked, taking a sniff. The odor was familiar. She’d smelled it very recently, in fact. She gasped when she realized what it was and reached for the bottle, but Basen wrapped it up again.

“I take it you know something,” Jinshi said.

“Is that incense powder?” she asked.

“Yes, it is.”

Incense powder was made from plant material, including *shikimi*. It was intensely poisonous, and caused vomiting, stomach pains, and diarrhea.

“Dr. Kan informed me that it’s poisonous,” Jinshi said.

“He’s right. Its effects are exactly the ones we saw yesterday.” Symptoms could occur at any time within several hours after ingesting the poison.

Jinshi studied Maomao’s face. “This particular bottle was found in the possession of Consort Aylin.”

I knew it. She'd smelled that odor when she'd been distributing the mosquito-repellent incense. It had been in Consort Aylin's room.

Yao, the shrine maiden, and the shrine maiden's other food taster had all been poisoned, but Yao was in by far the worst shape. Her symptoms would abate, only to come back. Now, three days after the incident, she was in much better condition, but they still couldn't relax.

Maomao took over Yao's place at the shrine maiden's villa, staying there to minister to the maiden and her servant. Their symptoms were minor enough that Maomao's presence was more precautionary than anything. The question of who had planted the poison was far more pressing.

And it looks like Aylin's involved again.

Why would a woman from Shaoh poison the Shaohnese shrine maiden? Hadn't she been trying to get the shrine maiden to help her? Or had this been her real goal from the moment she entered the rear palace? Didn't she supposedly feel indebted to the woman she had just allegedly tried to murder?

For the moment, she's a suspect, Maomao thought. There was evidence against her: the incense powder that had been found in her robes. One of her ladies-in-waiting had discovered it while helping her change and reported it.

Maomao knew some facts. For example, that Aylin had obtained a large quantity of the poisonous incense powder prior to the banquet. And that at the banquet, she'd been seated by her compatriot, the shrine maiden. What's more, Maomao knew Aylin wasn't watched at every moment. After all, she'd been alone when Maomao had come with the incense, not even a lady-in-waiting in attendance upon her. Perhaps she'd bided her time at the banquet, waiting for an opportune moment to poison the food.

The possibility couldn't be ruled out. The witness testimony and the circumstantial evidence were considered enough to justify questioning Aylin personally.

We have to find the perpetrator as soon as we can. Before it became a diplomatic problem. *But what if the culprit is someone from the same country?*

That would be awfully convenient for Li. The attempted murder of the shrine maiden could be passed off as a civil dispute between Shaohnese

visitors. Yes, if Aylin were responsible, that would make everything very simple.

I wonder what Lahan would do. The image of the numbers- (and looks-)obsessed little man floated through her mind. This had all begun when he and Aylin had discussed either sending food to Shaoh or giving her political asylum. Lahan was too clever to let himself be caught in the fallout of this incident, but it couldn't be any fun for him regardless.

There must be more to this, Maomao thought. There were too many questions, too many things that didn't fit. She didn't like it at all.

On the morning of the fifth day, the shrine maiden's attendant informed Maomao, "The honored shrine maiden is quite fine now. You *may* go."

"I'm not sure she looks well yet, myself," Maomao responded.

"The trouble *is* of the heart. How could she feel well, given who is involved?"

Fair enough. It would be a bitter pill to be nearly assassinated in a distant country, and to know that the would-be killer was from your own homeland. "I understand. An acquaintance of hers, yes?"

"Yes," the other woman said after a second. "For she might have *be*come the next shrine maiden, once."

Sounds like my information is solid.

"She and her cousin Ayla both lived with the honored shrine maiden un*til* the age of twelve." The attendant sighed as if to say *How could this have happened?* Maomao wondered as well, but it wasn't her place to ask too many questions.

Instead she simply said, "Thank you."

A carriage was waiting for Maomao when she left the shrine maiden's villa. She climbed aboard and found her father inside. "Is Yao all right?" she asked.

"For the moment. En'en's watching her. She'll let me know if the young lady takes a turn for the worse."

Maomao had heard that Yao had briefly been stable, only to worsen and then stabilize again. Clearly, her condition still demanded caution, which meant that if her father was here, there must be a reason.

So it proved. Looking out the window, the old man said, "We won't be going back to the medical office. We'll go right past it." Past the medical office—that meant into the part of the court where the important people

dwelt. Maomao could think of one reason they might be going there.

"Is this about the dinner?" she asked. Maomao and her father had been taking care of those who had been poisoned at the event. With Aylin under suspicion, it was hardly surprising the authorities should want to speak to Maomao and Luomen. The carriage trundled past the medical office and toward its destination: Jinshi's palace.

"Please, come in." Suiren greeted them, polite as ever, although Maomao thought she caught a fleeting hint of a grin when the silver-haired woman looked at her. A cunning old thing, she was. Maomao bowed her head in return. Suiren took them to a room where Jinshi, Basen, and Lahan waited. The bespectacled little man wore a noticeable grimace; these events had weakened him.

"I assume you know why we've called you here," Jinshi said. His color wasn't very good—overworking himself again, Maomao suspected. Before she went home, she would have to get him to take a nap. By force if necessary.

"Does it have to do with Consort Aylin?" Maomao asked.

"Indeed. We'd like to begin by hearing from Sir Luomen." He obviously wasn't going to waste time on pleasantries.

"I'm afraid I can only speak to what happened with Yao, the medical assistant."

That's not true, Maomao thought. Well... It was and it wasn't. Her father was a very careful person. What he meant was that he could only speak *with confidence* about what had happened to Yao. All else would be assumption, and Luomen didn't like to speculate.

"Her symptoms were severe, including stomach cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea. At one point they appeared to stabilize, only to worsen again. However, at the moment, they've improved."

This all aligned with what Maomao had heard: the symptoms were precisely those of incense powder poisoning. The seriousness of their presentation, however, and the way they had gotten worse after subsiding once, puzzled her. Incense powder included shikimi, which was highly toxic—enough that it could potentially kill a person. The berries were especially poisonous, but incense powder was produced by grinding up only the skin of the fruit and the leaves.

I'm sure she would have noticed if she'd eaten enough of it to get that sick. Maomao had given Yao some pointers on how to look for poison in food, including sniffing it for any unusual odors. Then again, Yao's color

hadn’t been good before the meal. Maybe her nose had been stuffed up.

Her father’s next words turned Maomao’s suspicion into certainty. “I suspect we’re dealing with a mycotoxin—something from a mushroom or fungus. Not shikimi poison.”

Luomen’s audience was dumbfounded; what he was saying went against all their assumptions. No doubt they’d brought him here to seal the case against Aylin. They must have thought they had all the evidence they needed.

“I see!” Maomao said. It made sense to her now. Many fungal toxins were much more potent than shikimi, although they produced similar symptoms. And Yao wouldn’t have recognized the smell or flavor of most toxic mushrooms.

While everyone else was busy being shocked, Lahan leaned forward. “Are you suggesting Consort Aylin was framed? Tell me, Uncle!” There was an unmistakable note of giddiness in his voice, and with good reason. If someone he had brought to Li committed a crime like this, some of the responsibility would have to fall on him. This entire situation was outside even Lahan’s calculations.

“I’m saying only that we aren’t dealing with poisonous incense powder here,” Luomen replied. His roundabout way of talking was obviously frustrating his audience.

“May I interject?” Maomao said, hoping to move things along with her own observations. She laid out the facts, trying to be as objective as possible so she wouldn’t be carried away by what her father had said. “The shrine maiden and the other food taster displayed very similar symptoms—stomach pain and vomiting. Theirs were much less severe than Yao’s, however, and cleared up in about three days. I have some doubts about the hypothesis that a mycotoxin was involved here. Specifically, I think the shrine maiden and her attendant ingested too little of it to have the observed effects, and I believe the onset of symptoms was too rapid.”

The symptoms did make her think of the toxic *Amanita virosa* mushroom, which was extremely poisonous, but slow-acting. The terrible thing was that by the time the effects of the toxin began to show, it had already been absorbed by the body, which was why it could seem to be cured only for the symptoms to recur. Maomao didn’t question her father’s treatment of Yao, but if it was true that there was a poisonous fungus involved, then the case had to be considered more serious than an episode of shikimi poisoning.

It had occurred to Maomao that they might be dealing with a poisonous mushroom, but she had dismissed the possibility on the basis that, if that were the case, it should have taken about six hours for symptoms to appear. The three women had shown signs of poisoning far sooner than that.

I'm sure my old man must know that, she thought. So why would he say such a thing? He must have a reason. Could it be...

What if they consumed the mushrooms before *the food tasting?*

Before she knew what she was doing, Maomao slammed her hands down on the table. The conversation in the shrine maiden's villa! How could she not have noticed?

"Master Jinshi!" she said.

"What is it?"

"Did you tell the shrine maiden that Consort Aylin was suspected of poisoning her?"

"I don't want to tell her anything until we're certain. It would only create unnecessary anxiety."

Yes. Yes, of course. And yet the attendant at the villa had spoken of it:

"The trouble is of the heart. How could she feel well, given who is involved?"

"She might have become the next shrine maiden, once."

Maomao had assumed from that exchange that the shrine maiden already knew who the suspect was. Maomao herself was aware, so she hadn't thought twice about the shrine maiden knowing as well. *But* how *did she know?*

Now Maomao saw why Yao's case had been so severe, but those of the shrine maiden and her attendant had been so much lighter. She could explain the delay in the onset of symptoms.

"Dad," she began, giving him a serious look, "would it be all right if I engaged in some speculation?"

He seemed uncomfortable. "You'll have to be prepared to be held accountable for whatever you say." Once the words were out of her mouth, she wouldn't be able to take them back.

"Sometimes one must speak all the same," she said. Her father was silent at that; Maomao took it as tacit permission.

"Sounds like you have something for us," Jinshi said.

"Yes, sir. Although it's only one possibility." Perhaps making that explicit would give her an escape route if she needed it. Or perhaps she

simply wasn't willing to speak with absolute confidence. "I believe it was *not* Consort Aylin who planted the poison."

"Why so?" Jinshi was never going to simply take her word for it. He wanted reasons. Lahan and Basen were likewise watching her.

"If we accept what my old man—ahem, what Dr. Kan suggested, that the case involves a poisonous mushroom, it becomes difficult to sustain the belief that Consort Aylin tainted the food."

Considering the time symptoms took to appear, the victims would have to have consumed *A. virosa* long before the banquet. Aylin had been under guard since the moment she left the rear palace; even when her lady-in-waiting had left her alone, she hadn't been able to leave her room, and she'd had no confederates to help her. She couldn't have poisoned the food before the banquet.

"So who did, then?"

"If the food was indeed poisoned, sir, it would have to have happened at the villa."

Yao had been living with the shrine maiden for days prior to the banquet, eating the same food she did. It made the most sense to assume Yao had been exposed to the poison while still at the residence, and that narrowed down the list of possible perpetrators.

"I believe it was one of the shrine maiden's attendants. In other words, she poisoned *herself*."

This drew fresh consternation from the listeners—all except Luomen, who remained impassive. He'd probably come to the same conclusion, but he had stayed true to his unwillingness to speculate.

If the poisoning had been, in essence, a show, it would also explain why the shrine maiden and her attendant had suffered less severe symptoms than Yao. Yao would have been the only one to seriously consume the poison; the other two would have taken only enough to put on a convincing "performance," or might have used a different, less serious toxin.

The same line of reasoning could explain why the attendant had known who the alleged perpetrator was without being told—if this had all been done with the intention of pinning the crime on Aylin. She and the shrine maiden had known each other long enough that the maiden would be aware of her old friend's propensity for incense powder. *Poisonous* incense powder.

Maomao understood why her father insisted on not working on

assumptions, but some things could push even Maomao over the edge. *They had to drag Yao into this!* They'd callously used her. The seriousness of Yao's symptoms would lend credence to the idea of an attempted poisoning. Yao could be a little condescending, but at heart she was a decent young lady, dedicated to her studies. Maomao was no En'en, but this was enough to make the bile well up in her throat.

She belatedly noticed the numbness in her hands, and it made her stop and ask herself whether she was speaking rationally. Luomen was still silent, while Jinshi was practically slack-jawed.

"I have a question," said Basen, speaking for the first time. He was quick to react in situations like this. "Why would the shrine maiden want to entrap Consort Aylin?"

"I believe I have an idea," Lahan said, raising his hand. "Consort Aylin told me she thought the shrine maiden might have borne a child—and that it might have been the White Lady. I asked Maomao to see if she could tell whether the shrine maiden had given birth."

If it transpired that the shrine maiden was no longer qualified for her office, then she could be stripped of that office. Indeed, she might very well be punished.

"The shrine maiden, the mother of the White Lady? That would be explosive," Jinshi said. It would mean that Aylin had sought political asylum not only because of her enemies in the government, but because she knew something about the shrine maiden's secret. It would also explain why the shrine maiden had followed her to Li.

"But if this was all to keep Consort Aylin quiet..." Maomao said. Lahan's suggestion should have seemed perfectly reasonable, yet something about it nagged at her. She looked at her father. He only sat there, silent, neither affirming nor denying anything.

Chapter 18: A Man and a Woman Play the Game

“You’re not going home with Sir Luomen?” Jinshi asked Maomao. She’d stayed behind and was boiling some water.

“You seem awfully pale, Master Jinshi. How many days since you last got a proper sleep?”

A question for a question. She mixed some herbs that would help him get to sleep into the water and passed him a cup. Lahan had left with Luomen, while Basen had gone to see both of them off.

“I’ve been sleeping every night,” Jinshi retorted.

“Let’s try a different question. How many total hours have you slept in the last several days?”

Jinshi started counting on his fingers. He didn’t look likely to get through an entire hand. He scowled and drank the tea.

“Early morning tomorrow?” she asked.

“No, for once things are relatively quiet. In fact, today is the first day I’ve been able to come back to my palace in some time.” So he really was working hard.

“Lady Suiren must be worried about you.”

“And you’re not?” Jinshi said, the cup still at his lips. He loosened the chest of his robe, prompting Maomao to look around for some sleepwear. Suiren entered at exactly that moment—thankfully—but no sooner had she handed Maomao a set of nightwear than she showed herself out again. *Wants me to help him change, huh?*

She’d done it before, back when she’d been serving in Jinshi’s residence, but she had never liked it. Quite frankly, Maomao thought he could stand to dress himself, while Jinshi held the fundamental conviction that he should be assisted in all things. Never the twain would meet. When it came down to it, however, one of them was of far higher status than the other, and it was Maomao who had to bend.

She put the sleepwear on him at almost the same moment as he sent his cloak fluttering to the ground. She tossed the belt around his waist, tied it loosely, and then collected the garment off the floor. “You make En’en do

this for you too?" she grumbled.

"No, it happens I don't."

"But you have her tie up your hair." Maomao considered that part and parcel of helping him change.

"That I do, but always under Suiren's supervision."

"Always?"

"To forestall the possibility of a swift stab from behind."

"She—" *would never*, Maomao began to say, but she stopped. In a state of extreme Yao deprivation, there was no telling what En'en might do.

"Suiren can be overprotective. She's never even left us alone in a room together."

Yet here were Jinshi and Maomao in exactly that situation. Maomao said nothing.

"Suiren thinks quite highly of you," said Jinshi.

"That's not my fault." Being high in Suiren's esteem carried no benefits for Maomao. Indeed, she was hard-pressed to think of a single good thing that might come of it. She took the empty teacup and was about to leave, but Jinshi caught her wrist.

"You're always trying to put me off," he said.

"I can't imagine what you mean, sir."

Staying in this room was dangerous. She wanted to get out while the getting was good, but he wouldn't let go of her.

"Suiren feels quite urgently that I should take a consort of my own," he said. "She claims it would mean less work for me."

"I'm sure she's right." Maomao was intent on acting as if the matter didn't concern her. That, however, could only aggravate Jinshi.

"You know what I'm trying to say. How can you act so indifferent? Are you that desperate to avoid me?"

"Y—"

She slapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late.

"Were you about to blurt out *yes*?"

"Pay it no mind, sir."

Jinshi glowered at her. He was getting dark bags under his eyes. *He should stop wasting time with me and get some sleep.* He was obviously exhausted, and she wished she could order him to go to bed. But Jinshi was still talking.

"I can see why Sir Luomen looks so harassed all the time. I can practically even understand how our honored strategist must feel!"

Maomao's ears started ringing. Jinshi was tired; she knew that. He had nowhere to vent his frustrations, and he had a great many frustrations to vent, and on top of that he was suffering from lack of sleep. Any other time, he might have taken more care. Might have known not to say what he said. Yet said it he had.

Strangely, it wasn't the mention of the strategist that upset Maomao the most. It was the name *Luomen* that kept reverberating in her mind. Today she'd had that rarest of things, a difference of opinion with her father. Jinshi had seized on it.

Maybe he wasn't the only one who was tired. Maomao hadn't been sleeping so well herself. And at last she exploded.

"You're forever telling me I need to use my words, Master Jinshi, but are you in any position to criticize? Everything you say to me, everything you do, it's like it's calculated to save you from ever having to actually say what you mean! To make *me* figure it all out! You know, you remind me of someone. You act exactly like a man who used to come by our brothel all the time. He was in love with one of the girls, but he would never just come out and say it. He thought it should be obvious from the way he acted. He was so sure he had a good thing going with this woman that he never sent her so much as a letter. I remember how forlorn he looked when someone else swooped in and snatched her away! He kept coming to the brothel after that—to get drunk and whine to the ladies. Well, in my opinion, he could have avoided all that heartbreak if he'd told the woman how he felt. Clearly, unequivocally, so that she knew where they stood. It was the least he could have done!"

Everything came out in a torrent. She felt like she'd said it all in one breath. It was strange, she thought, to hear so many words come out of her own mouth. She was mystified. Jinshi was no less startled, but the shock soon left his face, replaced by something else. He got up off the bed and stared down at Maomao.

Shit. Now I've done it. She'd given him a piece of her mind, and he was about to give her one back.

"So I should be clear, should I? Unequivocal? I should say what I mean? If I did, would you actually listen to me? Is that what you're telling me? I'm going to hold you to that! Right this minute. I'll say it all. Don't plug your ears—listen to me!" He grabbed her hands as she was in the process of trying to put her fingers in her ears.

He took a breath. He was looking at Maomao, but somehow he seemed

almost embarrassed.

Finally he managed, “Now listen to me, y—I mean, Maomao! Listen close! I am going to make you my wife!”

He’d said it. He’d actually said it. To her, it sounded like a death sentence. All his vagueness, all his ambiguity had actually been a show of kindness to Maomao. For with her social status, the words once spoken were as good as a command. She couldn’t fight them, couldn’t contravene what he wished.

Jinshi was blushing, but Maomao was completely pale. “I wish there were an immortal here who could turn back time,” she mumbled.

“Your internal monologue is showing,” Jinshi snapped. He couldn’t quite bring himself to meet her eyes, yet he hadn’t let go of her wrists. A profoundly uncomfortable feeling hung between them. At length, he sighed. “Be that as it may, you’re right that with things as they stand, making you my wife could only harm you. Neither of us wants that.”

He took a sip from the pitcher by the bedside in an effort to bring down the flush.

“For you, I *will* remove every obstacle that keeps us apart. One day. Just know that.” With that, Jinshi buried himself under the covers. “I won’t let what you fear come to pass. I swear it.”

Soon she heard him breathing evenly in sleep. *What I fear...* Maomao pictured Empress Gyokuyou. *I don’t think Master Jinshi knows,* she thought. She didn’t think he was aware of the secret of his own birth. *What about Empress Gyokuyou? Does she know?*

And what did His Majesty want for Jinshi? What about Ah-Duo?

It’s never good to know too much.

When Jinshi discovered the truth, would he still try to find a way to make things palatable to Maomao? She wasn’t the only one concerned. Could he concoct circumstances that would stave off talk from everyone around them?

No... Even he couldn’t do that. It was difficult, if not impossible, to manufacture a situation that pleased everyone, and it only got harder the further you went up the social ladder.

Maomao shook her head and made to leave the room. At the doorway, she ran into Suiren, who was smiling and for some inexplicable reason giving her a thumbs-up. All Maomao could do was glare at the old lady as she went by.

Chapter 19: The Truth Behind the Truth

For several days, there was no word from Jinshi. Maomao didn't believe her speculations were beyond questioning, but neither did she think it had been a mistake to contradict her old man. The case of the attempted poisoning of the shrine maiden carried on, however, and Aylin remained the prime suspect.

When questioned, Aylin confessed. Her motive (she claimed) was that she hadn't wanted to come to Li, but had been driven to it, and she bore a grudge against the shrine maiden, who was one of those responsible for her flight. After all, Aylin might have become shrine maiden herself—she had been raised for it—if the current occupant of the office hadn't remained for so many years.

To confess openly to an antipathy toward not only the shrine maiden but Li itself, she must have been truly desperate. *All she'd have to do is add the Emperor's name to that list to make herself the most hated woman in Li.* As it was, the story seemed to be that a shiftless foreigner had attacked the shrine maiden out of personal animus. That was simple enough. And convenient.

"Bullshit..." The word was out of her mouth before she could stop herself. Lahan was giving her the lowdown. This wasn't something that could be handled by messenger, so he'd summoned her on the pretext that he needed some kind of medicine.

"You're telling *me*," he replied as he downed some stomach medication. Maomao was somewhat surprised to realize, belatedly, that even he could have an upset stomach sometimes. "I think this is as fishy as you do. The consort told me herself how much she respects the shrine maiden. And now she hates her enough to try to kill her?" He shook his head and sighed deeply. "Speaking of which, how's that young woman? Yao or whatever it is?" As the one at least partly responsible for the entire affair, Lahan felt guilty about what had happened to her.

"She escaped with her life, but I think there may be aftereffects."

Yao had gotten much better under Luomen and En'en's ministrations.

She wasn’t completely recovered, though, not to mention she was distraught to learn she had ingested poison without realizing it. Maomao didn’t blame her, as poisonous mushrooms could be surprisingly delicious, and she had been about to say so when her father had gently stopped her. He seemed to think it might not be as reassuring as she imagined.

Maomao visited the shrine maiden daily to see how she was doing, but to be quite blunt, she wasn’t sure whether the woman was acting or not. If she was only pretending to be ill, then there was no need for Maomao to pelt her with questions about her condition—indeed, doing so could make her an accomplice in the framing of Aylin. So she’d had ample opportunity to talk to the shrine maiden, but no right to ask the questions she really wanted to.

The biggest issue was that everything Maomao had said was ultimately speculation, with no specific evidence to back it up. If it was true that the shrine maiden had come all this way simply to make Aylin take a fall, then what was the weakness Aylin was so intent on leveraging? Wasn’t this entire endeavor too risky?

“I wonder what she has on the shrine maiden,” Maomao mused.

“I was so sure they were good friends. Notwithstanding the consort’s attempts to exploit that vulnerability. She never seemed like she had a grudge against the shrine maiden. She seemed to genuinely respect her.”

Lahan leaned his elbows on the table and took a drink of water. “You need to take it with food or it’ll upset your stomach,” Maomao said, remembering. With some annoyance, Lahan fetched a snack from the shelf. A bun filled with potato paste. When Maomao asked if they didn’t have any meat buns around, she was curtly informed that they did not. Boo.

“Anyway, if they were such good friends, I don’t think we would be in this situation right now,” Maomao said.

“I’m still convinced that Consort Aylin has deep respect for the shrine maiden. If the charges were spurious, why would she offer the testimony that she did?”

“True enough,” Maomao admitted.

“I’ve told her that if she has anything to say in her own defense, I’m more than open to hearing her out, but instead she goes and incriminates herself...” Was he really convinced by the charges against her? “She’s quite the actor.” She had spoken ill of the shrine maiden yet also confessed to the crime, essentially taking the guilt upon herself.

“Exactly how much did you hear about the relationship between Aylin and the shrine maiden?” Maomao asked.

“Just what I told you. Mistress Aylin was one of the potential future shrine maidens, and spent almost five years as an apprentice with the current one. Typically, apprentices live in the shrine maiden’s palace for their entire tenure, until their ‘monthly time’ is upon them and they lose the right to be shrine maiden. Usually, a marriage is found for them once they leave the maiden’s palace, but Consort Aylin was staunchly against that arrangement. Instead, she and her cousin sought sanctuary with their grandfather. He was a practical man, and saw how much use could be made of the education they’d received from the shrine maiden.”

That was how they had ended up as emissaries. Maomao had wondered how a couple of women had come to travel to a foreign country in such a capacity all by themselves, but it sounded like it hadn’t been an easy path. Yet if Aylin had learned of the shrine maiden’s baby, or at least guessed at its existence, during her time as an apprentice...

“Wouldn’t you normally expose what you knew sooner?” Maomao said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean about the infant. Her suspicion that the shrine maiden had borne a child.” What if she hadn’t been looking to find the shrine maiden’s weakness—but had merely been curious? “If she’s known about this child ever since she was an apprentice, why bring it to light now?”

“A fair point.” Maybe it was Lahan’s fondness for a pretty face that had created this blind spot for him. He straightened his glasses, then crossed his arms and closed his eyes. “How about this, then? What if investigating whether the shrine maiden had a child was only a pretext?”

“So you think so too?”

Lahan had some...less than ideal qualities, but he was intelligent. When he put his mind to something, he could be very quick to figure it out. “Suppose that was a bluff. A cover for something even bigger. Suppose this bigger thing is the reason we’re in this situation now.”

“I admit, it would connect a lot of dots.” The question then became what “something even bigger” was. Maomao and Lahan both made thoughtful noises. “If my old man were here...” Maomao began.

“I grant my honored uncle appears to know something. But there’s every chance he would refuse to tell us if he did.”

Luomen had looked all along like something about the situation

bothered him. Had he come to some realization that still eluded Maomao? Maybe he had a guess—but as long as it remained a guess, he was unlikely to speak of it. Maomao felt herself getting angry again.

"If my honored uncle could only have examined the shrine maiden himself, we might have learned something..."

"Gee, sorry for being so inexperienced," Maomao snapped. But she agreed something was strange. Surely it should be all right for a eunuch to touch the shrine maiden, even if he was, or had once been, a man. She was silent for a long moment.

"What's the matter?" Lahan asked.

She only mumbled, "Eunuch..." She pressed her hand to her forehead. She felt like she had the scattered pieces of an answer. She tried to call to mind what she knew. She took out the notes from the folds of her robes. She'd recorded details of her exams of the shrine maiden. She'd tucked En'en's letter in beside it as well.

"What's that?" Lahan asked.

"A list of foods the shrine maiden eats frequently. They all treat women's disorders—that is to say, they increase female *qi*. This is a list of their applications."

The list included the ingredients the friendly medical official had said he'd been compelled to take on his visits to the rear palace. At first Maomao had thought he was so shaken by the memory because they tasted terrible, but when she saw the effects, she had to give a sympathetic smile.

"I think *you* could use some of this stuff, Maomao," Lahan ribbed her as he looked down the list.

"Yeah, sure. Pop quiz: what are the characteristics of a eunuch?"

"You know, you could stand to be a little more respectful to your older brother. Bah, anyway. A eunuch's male *qi* dwindles. His hair becomes thinner and his voice gets higher."

"Yes, and he becomes more likely to put on weight as he gets older, at which point he can seem to age very rapidly. You can see it in my own father. But there's another thing." Lahan looked at her, most curious what it might be. "If a boy is castrated before his development into a man begins, his voice never changes, and his body hair never comes in. Because he lacks the male *qi* that motivates growth, his arms and legs can become disproportionately long."

"I've never exactly taken a long, hard look at the shrine maiden. Are you implying..."

“She’s somewhat tall for a woman, and her limbs are rather long. She’s begun to acquire a bit of a paunch the last few years. And as it happens, there’s a sickness that affects eunuchs that causes symptoms quite similar to those of a woman whose *qi* is decreasing.”

The details all fit.

“Hold on. I know even you can tell the difference between a castrated man and an actual woman. You got a good look at her chest, at least! Wait...” Lahan had evidently remembered what was written on the list of medicines.

“Yes, and it was present and accounted for.” Maomao took out the notes again, feeling that same rush of anger. En’en’s letter enumerated the effects of various medicines—including hasma.

Hasma: Excellent for good skin and general beauty. Stamina booster; high in nutritional value. Overuse, however, can cause the chest to become enlarged.

This was one of the things En’en was feeding Yao. It would certainly explain the extent of her development—in fact, Maomao recalled En’en bragging about exactly that. Perhaps this was what had made the old physician smile with such pain. Too much of it could cause even a man to develop an ample chest, and that was no joke.

“The chest is obviously the first thing you look at when trying to distinguish between a man and a woman. The position of the bellybutton should have tipped me off.” The shrine maiden’s paunch had made it hard to judge, even if Maomao did wonder about it. If even Maomao, who was quite familiar with the naked bodies of both men and women, hadn’t connected the dots, how much harder would it be for Yao and En’en? The reason eunuchs weren’t allowed near the shrine maiden was because they were even more physically like “her” than the average woman. The secret might have gotten out.

This had been the plan all along.

“I want you to investigate whether the shrine maiden has borne a child.” At the moment of that request, Maomao hadn’t imagined the shrine maiden was a castrated man.

Shit! The wool had been pulled completely over her eyes. The strange look Maomao’s father had given her when she’d first reported the shrine maiden’s notable physical characteristics—maybe it was because the possibility had occurred to him even then. If he’d been able to look at the shrine maiden himself, he would almost certainly have discovered the

truth.

"Is this the secret the shrine maiden's been so desperate to hide?" Lahan said. It would certainly be the kind of vulnerability an opportunist could readily exploit. "But wait... If it is, why come all the way to another country to try to silence a woman who's already become a consort at a foreign court? And why do it in such a convoluted way?"

The shrine maiden was not a woman: if that hypothesis was correct, what other apparent realities might it undermine? Was the "shrine maiden" trying to pin the affair on Aylin—or for that matter, was Aylin trying to take the blame on herself? If so, why? She gained nothing by it—but Li did.

"On that point," Maomao said. "Consider what would happen if the shrine maiden's killer had been one of our own people."

"It would be a matter of national face," said Lahan. "It could even mean war. Makes me pretty grateful that Mistress Aylin confessed to everything herself."

"So it's no problem for us if she's the culprit?"

"I wouldn't say *no* problem, but it's unlikely to start an international conflict. It will unquestionably put us on the back foot with Shaoh, however."

So Shaoh would find itself in an advantageous position vis-à-vis one of its biggest neighbors, and without a war. It made Maomao's head spin, but she knew she had to stay calm and think things through. Start with the shrine maiden's gender.

"What would happen if Shaoh found out their shrine maiden was a man?" she asked.

"What would happen if we found out our Emperor was a woman?" Lahan replied.

Maomao realized her question was ridiculous—it seemed like a contradiction in terms. Li had never in its history had an empress as sole ruler. Yes, the former emperor's mother was sometimes referred to as the empress regnant, but that was something closer to a nickname, not a title proper. If she'd attempted to take the throne by pretending to be a man, not only would she have been punished, but trust in the government would have been deeply shaken.

"It's said that the government of Shaoh has two pillars, the shrine maiden and the king," said Lahan. "I'm sure there are those who would be happy to see that reduced to one pillar, but in any case, the authority of the

next shrine maiden would be at rock bottom—if there even was a next shrine maiden. All the advances so diligently made during the era of the current shrine maiden would be undone."

The current shrine maiden's long tenure had allowed women to express their opinions more freely in Shaoh. If it was discovered that the "maiden" was a man, it would uproot all that had been achieved. What must Aylin feel about that? Aylin, who thanks to the education the shrine maiden gave her was able to avoid a marriage she didn't want and even become an emissary despite being a woman?

"Whoever the shrine maiden's enemies are, the king or his associates, they would have figured her out sooner or later. So instead she did something unprecedented—she took a trip," Maomao said. She wasn't sure, just trying the idea out. "The whole point of which was to prevent her enemies from discovering the truth, by—"

She stopped. The shrine maiden had gone somewhere she wouldn't be discovered, somewhere they couldn't reach her. So she would leave behind no evidence. No doubts. Maomao pressed a hand to her forehead. She gritted her teeth. This couldn't mean what she thought it did—could it? Yet the dawning realization was the one that made the most sense in light of everything the shrine maiden had done.

Finally she gave voice to her awful suspicion.

"By committing suicide."

Chapter 20: Mushroom Congee

The breeze was damp. So much cooler than the climate she came from—she couldn't seem to get used to the feeling of it on her skin. The sun was less intense here, though. Even indoors, she could tell. She could take slightly longer walks than normal, and that made her happy.

She thought back over the adventures she'd had these past months. Before, she'd spent all her time in her residence, being worshipped. She was accustomed by now to people venerating her, but it could get boring. She'd been prepared to hand over the position to anyone who wanted it—yet her own existence prevented any chance of that happening. *Shrine maiden*, they called her, and had for so long that she no longer remembered her own name. If she abdicated her seat now, she wouldn't even know what to call herself.

And now, it was all finally coming to an end. This languid stretch of time had been the last postponement.

Her room was darkened by an array of curtains. There was a rustle of cloth in the dimness. She wondered for a second what it was, but then she saw a girl peeking out at her. Her name was Jazgul. It meant "flower of spring." The girl, born without a voice, had been brought to her about a year before.

Perhaps it would have been uncouth to ask by what path she had come to be with the shrine maiden. She was quite pretty in her own way, but her long limbs betrayed malnutrition. She couldn't read or write, but she could hear, and she understood what was said to her. As for the lack of accomplishments, that was in fact just what the shrine maiden had needed.

The shrine maiden beckoned to Jazgul, who came to her happily. There were no visitors today. For some days now the shrine maiden had been sick in bed, unable to entertain Jazgul. Now she felt she had to make up for it.

She smiled at Jazgul as the girl approached her. She slid off the bed and brought her a few items from one side of the room. They included some pigment. The shrine maiden dipped her finger in the red stuff and daubed it on Jazgul's forehead, fringing the tattoo on her face to emphasize it. Jazgul simply stood and let her work, clearly pleased. Perhaps it was her lack of

learning, or the fact that she made no conversation, but she seemed even younger than she looked.

Once she had painted Jazgul's face, the shrine maiden took out several sheets of sheepskin paper, set up some dye, and gave Jazgul the feather of a waterfowl. "What kind of dream did you dream today?" she asked.

Jazgul began an unsteady illustration. Unable to either speak or write, these crude pictures were her only means of communication. When she was drawing, she became quite absorbed in what she was doing. But she couldn't stay in the shrine maiden's room. Indeed, it would soon be time to eat.

"Go back to your room," the shrine maiden said, collecting the paper and dye and giving them to Jazgul. The paper was too unwieldy for the girl to hold, though, and she dropped some of it. As she scrambled to pick it up, she looked up at the shrine maiden, silently begging to stay with her, but there were things even the shrine maiden could not change. She patted Jazgul's head, even more gently than usual. "You can't stay with me forever. I know you can draw pictures on your own."

Jazgul nodded, and the shrine maiden smiled. A few moments after the child left the room, the attendant with tanned skin entered. The shrine maiden called her "oracle." The word meant something very similar to "shrine maiden," and like the shrine maiden, the oracle, too, had forgotten her own name. It had been nearly twenty years now since she had taken over from the last oracle.

The shrine maiden remembered something the last oracle had said to her: that the word for "shrine maiden" was a homophone for another word, one that meant "child of the gods." It was appropriate that one called an oracle should serve the child of the gods, for was it not the duty of an oracle to hear the gods' voices?

Somewhere along the line, the "child of the gods" had become the "shrine maiden." Was it because only women had been chosen for the position? Or because only women had been left? She didn't know. She did, though, feel that it was right and proper that she herself should be "shrine maiden." She had been discovered by the previous oracle when she was very young. Indeed, she had lived in the shrine maiden's palace since before she could remember.

She'd been told she was special. Her white hair and white skin and red eyes. The lack of color in her body, they said, enabled her to hear the gods' voices more clearly. Her every movement came to be taken as prophecy,

read and interpreted by the oracle. Everyone knew that the prognostications of a pale shrine maiden would come true. She was the one person even the king dared not look in the eye; she was hardly even human, but sat amidst the shadows of her palace, enthroned like a god.

A shrine maiden did not need learning. Her very being was supreme. Throughout the ages, the oracles had never given the shrine maidens anything resembling an education. Yet that was what the previous oracle had done for this shrine maiden. Perhaps she'd just been a little...different. She'd taught the shrine maiden to read and write, given her letters.

None of which changed the fact that the shrine maiden knew nothing of the wider world.

She knew the shrine maiden could no longer occupy her office once she began menstruating, but what she did not know was what would happen to her after she had been dethroned. Unable to imagine what fate might await her, she turned ten, then fifteen.

Menses arrived at a different moment from person to person, and she had heard that there had been shrine maidens in the past to whom it never came. So she didn't question her own lack of menstruation, but simply continued as shrine maiden. Yet she couldn't help noticing that there were other things about her body that set her apart. For one thing, she didn't develop as women did. Her chest never grew, though her arms and legs kept getting longer. Even someone as sheltered as she was knew about the differences between men and women. When she asked the oracle, she was told, "You are special." After that, though, she found she was given new and unfamiliar foods to eat. Her chest began to swell, but still her blood never came.

The months and years passed with her still ignorant, still not comprehending. Her fame as shrine maiden increased, and so did the number of those who sought her auguries. She was told that while divining, she could do whatever she wished but must not speak. The oracle would say everything on her behalf.

The oracle who had told her all this, done all this for her, finally met her end when the shrine maiden was twenty years old. It had simply been her time, but having never seen anyone die, the shrine maiden hadn't fully understood. The ailing old oracle had been replaced by this new one—her granddaughter. Before she passed, the old oracle told the shrine maiden why her menses had never begun, why her body didn't behave like a woman's.

The shrine maiden, she said, had been born in a small village, a rare place of lush greenery among the parched lands of Shaoh. It had been established as a haven where shrine maidens who had left their office could retire, and many of the villagers had the blood of generations of shrine maidens in their veins. Some of those maidens must have been pale as well. It was there that the current shrine maiden had been born—a man.

It had seemed ludicrous when the oracle had revealed the truth. Like a bad joke. But the oracle just kept talking in her withered, crackly voice. She said the king at that time was a bad king. Shaoh flourished as a crossroads of trade, but he had outrageous ideas about making war on other lands. His advisers tried to talk him out of them, but he was young and headstrong and would not listen.

The shrine maiden was the other pillar, the one who could check the king. But the shrine maiden at that time had lacked the necessary force of will, and at her age she seemed soon to retire anyway. If a new shrine maiden arose, she might be able to stand against the king. Especially if she were that most sacred thing, a pale maiden.

So the oracle used the shrine maiden to cut the foolish king off at the knees. She made the shrine maiden not a man. He was castrated at the same time as the male goat kids.

Now a woman, the shrine maiden was presented to the king. It seemed she cried at the unaccustomed surroundings—little is unusual about a squalling infant, but the oracle used the moment to pronounce the king unfit.

The revelations seemed to invalidate the shrine maiden's entire life. In the space of an instant, her twenty years in the office were made a lie. She'd always believed she was special, but now she knew she was nothing but a pawn, used to unseat the king. She wished she could upbraid the dying oracle, vent her fury and shame. The shrine maiden, however, had been so sheltered from the world that she didn't even know what words to use at a moment like that. What good would it have done her, anyway? Even the modest knowledge she had, the oracle had given her in an attempt to salve her own conscience.

Upon the death of the previous oracle, the shrine maiden had gone to live near the village where she'd been born on the pretext of "recovering." The now-deceased oracle had been brilliant in her own way. She'd used her puppet, the shrine maiden, to the fullest and stabilized the nation's politics. Her granddaughter, now the oracle herself, was almost as capable

as her grandmother, but she lacked experience. Perhaps it would be fair to say that they had fled until she gained the necessary insight.

There was an unspoken understanding that upon the accession of a new oracle, the shrine maiden would change as well. Several young ladies of excellent background had been sent to the shrine maiden to become apprentices, and she educated them, just as the oracle had done for her. Perhaps she was simply trying to atone for deceiving them, but at least it served to broaden their future prospects.

She knew she could have handed the shrine maiden's seat over to one of them at any time, yet she couldn't help but cling to the office. She had, after all, been created to be shrine maiden. She didn't even have a name to call her own.

Aylin was friendly toward her, but many of the young women saw the shrine maiden as nothing but an obstacle. Ayla was among her enemies—she looked like Aylin's twin, yet the two women could hardly have been more different. About the time the shrine maiden knew she couldn't pretend to be recuperating forever, a messenger came from her village. A child had been born. It was brought to her wrapped in white swaddling clothes, its skin pale enough to see the blood vessels beneath.

"Honored shrine maiden," said a familiar voice, startling her out of her reverie. The oracle was standing before her. The shrine maiden must have been completely lost in her reminiscences. "Are you quite sure about this?" the oracle asked. In front of the shrine maiden was a bowl of rice gruel. Ah, yes. She'd been about to eat.

"It will raise suspicions if I delay any longer," the shrine maiden said brusquely.

The oracle said nothing, but her expression darkened. How could she make that face when she knew everything? She clenched her fists and looked at the ground, refusing to meet the shrine maiden's eyes.

"I'll take my meal alone. You go wait elsewhere." The shrine maiden smiled. She had to smile. "I know I can trust you with all that comes after."

She was about to bring the spoon to her lips when she became aware of a commotion outside. Frowning, she and the oracle looked at each other—and then the door burst open.

<Please excuse me!> cried a diminutive woman in the Li language. Quite a request for someone bursting into a dignitary's room. The shrine

maiden knew her, though—she was one of the medical assistants, the one who'd examined her before. But she wasn't supposed to be here today.

"H-How dare you be so rude!" the oracle said, attempting to block her way, but the young lady darted around her and made her way over to the shrine maiden. What had happened to the guards?!

"Rude, not me. This. My job!" She spoke haltingly in Shaohnese. She took advantage of the shrine maiden's astonishment to snatch the spoon from her. She stuck it into her own mouth and swallowed. The shrine maiden and the oracle both went white, but the court lady only smiled—in fact, she closed her eyes in bliss. Still grinning, she looked at the shrine maiden. "Very tasty. Mushroom congee."

She looked downright triumphant.

Chapter 21: The Shrine Maiden's Confession

Maomao took another spoonful before the shrine maiden's attendant grabbed the congee away. "Wh-What do you think you *are* doing?!" she demanded.

"Simple. I'm tasting for poison," Maomao replied, switching back to her own language. The attendant had done it first—clearly, Maomao's Shaohnese wasn't up to snuff. Frankly, she was glad to be conducting this conversation in her native tongue. "Give me that congee, please. I'm not done checking it. Or do you intend to let the honored shrine maiden eat the rest?"

The attendant stayed silent, which Maomao took as grounds to continue.

"I must say I'm impressed, even though I probably shouldn't be. The way you got your hands on that poison without leaving a trace."

"You have no proof!" The attendant scowled, but only for a second; she promptly regained her unflappable demeanor. Naturally—anyone who could be involved in such a far-reaching plot would have to be a good actor. The shrine maiden likewise appeared unfazed.

Makes sense, Maomao thought. She was never going to just conveniently burst out with a confession.

"If you'd be so kind as to wait a moment, then?" Maomao said. "If the congee was poisoned, I should start showing symptoms any moment now. Since I'm not sure how sudden or intense the poison's effects might be, please let me have the rest." She reached out, but the attendant made no move to give it to her. "There was only one piece of mushroom in the bite I had! That's not *nearly* a fatal dose! Come on, give it!"

"You cannot be *serious*. If you think it's poisoned, spit it out!"

"I'll do no such thing," Maomao said. She produced some notes from the folds of her robe.

"What is that?" the attendant asked.

"The notes kept by a court woman named Yao—the one who was tasting the honored shrine maiden's food for poison. She's a very diligent

student, and one of the things I taught her was that if a food smelled funny, she shouldn't eat it. If Consort Aylin had poisoned the food with her incense powder, Yao would have smelled it. She may not be very experienced, but she wouldn't make such a fundamental mistake."

The notes contained several days' worth of detailed observations from before the dinner.

"She made a careful record of what the honored shrine maiden ate. For breakfast the day of the formal dinner, it seems she had a congee much like this one."

The notes read: *Morning. Congee w/ mushrooms.*

"I'm sure you were well aware of the effects of the poison. That you timed it so they would appear immediately after the dinner. And might I venture that you were feeling a touch of guilt? You used just such an amount that with proper care, Yao could still be saved."

Yao was in much better shape now. There was no telling if there might be lingering damage to her internal organs, but at least she was no longer in immediate danger of her life. En'en was feeling very reassured as well.

"I'm afraid you *are* not making any sense. The criminal has already confessed to the crime, has she not?"

"Yes, she confessed. May I assume that it was today that you received word that the culprit had been found and dealt with? That's why Her Maidenship felt confident enough to go ahead and kill herself."

Insofar as Aylin had to take the fall, the shrine maiden could only commit suicide after the consort's guilt was assured. Maybe that was why she'd chosen a poison that could reappear in a second "wave." Even better for her, if she were to die after Aylin had been confirmed as the criminal, her death would likely be covered up. Nobody wanted Li accidentally stumbling on the true culprit.

Maomao looked at the women. Calm, cold. *I don't* think *they'd try to shut me up here and now...* Lahan was waiting at the shrine maiden's villa. They'd sent a messenger for Maomao's father, and she expected them soon. *It wouldn't be easy for them to shut my mouth...but having their plans undone at this stage can't be a welcome prospect for them.*

She understood. She knew that there was nothing for her to gain by doing this. The threatening tone she'd taken with them hadn't actually been about revealing their plans, but was simply an opening gambit, a way to get them to listen to her.

"Honored shrine maiden. I believe you and Consort Aylin know each

other well, do you not?" Maomao said.

"Yes," replied the shrine maiden. "*For* once, long ago, she might have become my successor." A look of sorrow passed over her face.

I thought so.

Aylin had been trying to protect the shrine maiden. Would she have done that if the shrine maiden had really been attempting to pin the whole thing on her? Knowing the relationship between them, it seemed possible that this had been their plan ever since Aylin had arrived at the rear palace.

"This will mean the gallows for her, you know," Maomao said.

The shrine maiden flinched at that. Compared to her attendant, she left something to be desired as a performer. If Maomao was hoping to get one of them to crack, the shrine maiden seemed her best target.

"I don't know how you do things in Shaoh, but in Li, murder—even attempted murder—is punishable by death. She dedicated her life to you. Are you simply going to let them kill her?"

Neither of the other women said anything.

"You are, then? Consort Aylin, the woman *you* educated so that she could have a future. Now you yourself are going to pluck that future away from her?"

Still Maomao got no reaction. *No use. I figured.* As she was trying to decide what to say next, however, the shrine maiden's head drooped where she was sitting on the bed and she let out a sort of moan.

"H-Honored shrine maiden," her attendant said.

"*What was I supposed to do?*" the shrine maiden said. The words carried none of the force of her office; they sounded pleading. Gossamer, as if the breeze might blow them away. When the shrine maiden began to speak again, it was in Shaohnese. Maomao struggled to keep up. <From the moment I was born, my life has been twisted, and all I could do was follow the path that had been laid out for me. I had nothing, nothing but being the shrine maiden. So I thought I could at least *be* the shrine maiden to the bitter end.>

"Honored shrine maiden!" the attendant said, shaking her, but she continued her confession in fluent Shaohnese peppered with the occasional word in the Li language. It was substantially as Maomao had guessed. The royal faction in Shaoh viewed the shrine maiden, by this time quite powerful, as an obstacle, and sought to dislodge her from her office. Perhaps she could have endured that, but they also intended to give her away in marriage once she was deposed. A touch of panic was

understandable.

"I suppose *that* they wis*hed* to drag the shrine maiden back *down* to earth," she said in the Li tongue, her accent thick. "That child did hate me so. Ayla..."

Ayla... Maomao thought.

The other emissary. So not everything Aylin said had been a fabrication. She'd skillfully woven in some facts as well. Perhaps Ayla's jealousy of the shrine maiden's position was what had fostered her resentment of albino people. It would explain why she had used the White Lady the way she had.

It wasn't clear if the royal faction had some sense of who the shrine maiden truly was, or if they simply hoped to degrade the sacred woman by making her a common bride after removing her from office. Either way, simply instating a new shrine maiden would dramatically reduce the power of the office.

Maomao hadn't specifically said that the shrine maiden was in fact a man, but from the context, they likely understood that she knew. Emotions were high, and perhaps it was a slip of the tongue, Maomao felt no inclination to draw attention to it.

"It was Aylin *who* first spoke to me of it," the shrine maiden said. Aylin and Ayla were like sisters, and Aylin had revealed that she had discovered what the other woman was thinking. Her plan to use the White Lady.

"*For* to her, the shrine maiden was something special," the attendant added. Aylin was well versed in Li's ways. She knew, for example, that if the shrine maiden were to die outside Shaoh's borders, her remains would be sent back to her homeland—and that burial was the custom in Li, with burning of bodies reserved for criminals. A simple cultural difference. In Shaoh, they believed that cremating the shrine maiden returned her to the sun, whence she had come.

And if all they want are some shards of bone, Aylin need only return some pieces that don't reveal the shrine maiden's gender. The shrine maiden's death would leave Li with a debt to repay to Shaoh, even if the killer was another Shaohnese. Yet Shaoh, for its part, would be free of the troublesome shrine maiden. The king would be quite pleased with that.

"Wouldn't it all be just the same, as long as you were gone?" Maomao asked the shrine maiden.

"No," she replied. "I may go, but there will be a*nother* shrine maiden."

So that's it. Another young woman yet to reach menstruation would be found and set up as shrine maiden, and the attendant, who would return from Li, would be the power behind her.

"The next shrine maiden is far more capable *than* I. That is why I can surrender the office to her."

Maomao wondered what made the current shrine maiden so sure that her successor was more suited than a person of more than forty years' age and experience. She kept her doubts to herself.

"There will be no trouble *with*out me."

This time Maomao couldn't restrain herself. "Are you really sure about that?" she asked. "That's only if everything goes the way you predict. Have you considered what might happen if His Majesty learns of your plan and becomes angry?"

Everything the shrine maiden had spoken of so far benefited Shaoh and only Shaoh. Li, which would be left holding the bag, gained nothing. Not even with Aylin and the shrine maiden both sacrificing themselves. The shrine maiden was thinking of the good of her country—but she would achieve it at the expense of another.

"What did you intend to do if Yao died?" To that question, at least, Maomao wanted an answer. She smacked Yao's notes. What had Yao done wrong? Could they tell her?

"W-Well... Well..."

Both other women clearly felt guilty. They had known they couldn't use too weak a poison, or it might not work. In order to make the shrine maiden's demise plausible, they had to demonstrate that there was a potent toxin involved. Yes, they had tried to attenuate it, but one wrong move could have resulted in Yao's death.

"Was your plan for Shaoh to reap all the benefit, and Li to bear all the cost? If that's the case, I will not stay silent about this," Maomao said.

"Even if I die?" the shrine maiden asked at length.

"I *hate* when people think everything's over just because *they're* dead!" It was as good as refusing to face the consequences of whatever you had done. Maomao felt better having been able to say what she had most wanted to say.

Abruptly, she found herself thinking about a cheerful young woman who had loved insects. A young woman who had vanished into the snow and never been found. Maomao occasionally peeked into the shops, wondering if one day she might stumble upon the hair stick she'd given

that girl.

"How can you be certain, honored shrine maiden, that Shaoh won't begin making demands of Li after you're gone?"

"I thought *per*haps you might bend to a few of Shaoh's wishes."

"Like what? For food?"

"That would *be* one thing, yes. And I thought... Perhaps you might be induced to hand over the pale woman, the one I believe you're holding in custody."

"You mean...the White Lady?"

The White Lady couldn't be the shrine maiden's daughter. It wasn't possible. Come to think of it, Aylin had hinted at the same thing right from the start. So what was the relationship between the two of them? At the very least, it seemed the White Lady was likely from Shaoh, given that Ayla had been using her.

"By all rights, that girl should have been brought up as the next shrine maiden," the shrine maiden said. The White Lady had been born in the shrine maidens' village; she and the present occupant of the office had a blood connection. Even granted that albino children seemed to be born more frequently than average in that line, still something distinguished her. "If I had simply vacated my office and given it over to her, none of this would have happened. But because I felt I had to cling to my place, I sent the pale infant back to her home."

Somehow, it had led to the child traveling to another country and stirring up trouble, until she ended up treated like a common criminal.

"I was afraid that if it became known that there was another albino child to take up the shrine maiden's mantle, there would only be more strife. So I asked for her to be raised in secret. But then..."

"Then she became a pawn in someone else's game."

"Yes. Used by Ayla, who wanted to destroy me. About five years ago, I heard that the girl had been taken away." The shrine maiden gazed at the ground, deeply distraught. The child had been unable to become shrine maiden, and there had been nowhere else for her to go.

"Wow. You really caused our country nothing but trouble," Maomao said.

"Watch your mouth!" the attendant said, her composure vanishing in an instant of fury. The shrine maiden, however, restrained her. They seemed to balance each other, one growing calmer the more emotional the other got. They acted like partners who had known and worked with each other

for a very long time.

“I only tell you the truth,” the shrine maiden said.

“I know. But consider spending the rest of your life making amends for what you’ve done.” It was the only thing Maomao could say, the only suggestion that had occurred to her even after a great deal of thought. If this didn’t reach the shrine maiden, there would be nothing more she could do. She looked directly at the woman. “Die for me. For real this time.”

Chapter 22: The Future Shrine Maiden

The bones clattered as they were placed in the ceramic jar. It could fit only a few shards, barely enough to fill both palms.

Hair white as a decorative tassel was held back with a woven blue hairband.

The nameless girl whose bones were now in the jar had surely never dreamed that she would go on to be venerated in a far country. She would never have envisioned the crowds of people attending the departure of her remains, couldn't have imagined the songs of peace and rest sung for her repose as her bones went on their way.

As she left the scene, Maomao touched the black sash she was wearing, a sign of loss—but no more than a sign.

After all that had happened, the shrine maiden died as planned. Not only Maomao, but even her father had been present to inspect the body. Had it been any other physician, Maomao had intended to have the shrine maiden take the drug that made one truly die for a brief period.

But my old man would never be fooled. She felt bad for threatening the shrine maiden, but she also knew that her father was a very soft touch where people's lives were concerned. She made him something like her coconspirator.

As for the real shrine maiden...

"Is this place acceptable to you, shrine maiden?" asked Jinshi. He wasn't sure what to call her now that she was no longer in office, but settled on continuing to use her former title. Since she no longer occupied her sacred position, men like Jinshi could now approach her.

They were in a room with layers of curtains, specially prepared to shield her from the sunlight. "Yes, it's quite *tran*quil," she said.

"I'm glad to hear that. I would be happy to change any of the furnishings if they don't meet your needs," said a handsome person in men's clothing from behind Jinshi—Ah-Duo. Her villa was fast becoming a haven for people like the shrine maiden who couldn't appear in public. The Emperor still visited Ah-Duo from time to time, for although she was

no longer a consort, she was far sharper and more thoughtful than the average bumbling bureaucrat. Then again, perhaps His Majesty simply wanted a friend with whom to share a drink.

They had every reason to keep the shrine maiden in such a place. She hadn't wished to give up her office while within Shaoh's borders. Instead, she had traveled abroad to die and let her body disappear. Political asylum had been out of the question for her; her authority as shrine maiden would have plummeted. Perhaps she had sought death because she felt there was no more she could do in her position.

But that's not true.

Did she realize how valuable she could be by continuing to occupy the top of her hierarchy, even here in a foreign country? Even once she had publicly stepped off the stage? All that she knew, all the information she had gleaned over decades, was a priceless resource. Perhaps it felt to her like she was betraying the land where she had lived so many years—but she was not in a position to say so at this moment.

"You'll honor the terms of our agreement?" Jinshi said, polite but firm.

"Of course. Have you not two hostages against me?" the shrine maiden replied. She was thinking of the White Lady and Aylin, both under arrest as criminals. Considering what they had done, it would have been and would still be perfectly ordinary to behead them at any moment. "I do *re*quest your aid to Shaoh, how*ever*." An audacious thing to say.

"If what you share with us makes it worth our while." Jinshi gave her his most luminous smile. It might not work on the shrine maiden, who was in some way beyond gender, but it somehow looked blinding even in her dim chamber.

There was no foul and fair in politics, only things that ended well or not. Situations like this one were hardly uncommon.

Maomao began to follow Jinshi as he left the room, but she turned back when the shrine maiden said, "Ah, may I have a moment?" She was holding some sort of scroll. "Take this." She gave it not to Jinshi, but to Maomao, who opened it, wondering what it could be. It was a simple roll of several sheets of sheepskin parchment, each covered with crude drawings.

"A child's scribbles?" Maomao asked before she could stop herself.

"Yes," the shrine maiden said. Maomao tried to remember whether there had been any children around—and her eyes widened as she remembered. *There was. One.* The girl with no speech who had been with

the attendant that day. Jazgul or something like that. Maomao remembered how she and her friends had sweated to find the child's guardian. *I haven't seen her around the villa, though...*

Maomao looked at Jazgul's pictures, wondering what significance they held. "Hrm?" she grunted. One of the images, drawn in dyes, showed two people wearing white clothes. Young women, Maomao thought. One of them had bandages wrapped around her arm. "Is this...me?" she asked.

"It is."

If Jazgul had drawn her and Yao, Maomao supposed she was obliged to accept the picture. It was strange, though—when they'd met Jazgul, En'en had been with them. And none of them had been wearing their medical-assistant outfits. As she puzzled over this mystery, Maomao noticed some numbers on the back of the parchment. Probably a date, but written in numerals she didn't recognize.

"So...what is this?" she asked.

"Jazgul drew it before we left Shaoh."

"Before you left?" But that didn't make any sense. That would have been long before she'd met Maomao and the others. Was the shrine maiden making some kind of joke?

For once, the shrine maiden appeared amused. "*Did* I not tell you that when I was gone, there would be another shrine *mai*den? That day, the day she *got* lost, Jazgul was uncharacteristically demanding. She insisted on going out. To meet you, I'm sure."

"I... I highly doubt that." Maomao only believed things for which there was concrete evidence. The shrine maiden must be joking; she was sure of it. She rolled up the first parchment. The second sheet depicted a shining figure who looked like the shrine maiden, along with a slim figure and another scrawled illustration of Maomao. Precisely the people in this room at this moment.

Maomao didn't say anything but only gazed at the parchment. "There's one more. Study it closely when you have the time," the shrine maiden advised.

Maomao stood, almost befuddled; she didn't know what to say.

The shrine maiden continued, "I wish for you to know that I, too, had it, once upon a time. The shrine maidens of Shaoh lack something, but there is something else they possess instead. I have no color in my skin, and Jazgul has no voice. Although I am afraid my abilities vanished from the moment I learned the truth about who I was." The shrine maiden was

evidently a quick learner, for she'd become much more fluent in the local language during her brief stay.

Maomao was still standing dumbstruck when Jinshi came back into the room. "What's keeping you? Let's go," he said.

"Right... Of course," Maomao said and followed after him. Jinshi gave her a curious look but went ahead. He must not have heard what the shrine maiden had said.

The shrine maiden... Who is she, really? Maomao wondered. There had to be some sort of logical explanation, but if so, Maomao didn't know what it was. She was still thinking about it as she climbed into the carriage. Maybe the pictures were a coincidence; maybe the shrine maiden was straining to make them fit the circumstances.

Sitting in the carriage, Maomao turned to the final sheet of parchment, but it was as perplexing as the rest.

"What's that supposed to be?" Jinshi asked.

"Beats me," she said.

The "picture" consisted only of a line across the page, the space above which had been scribbled black.

Epilogue

The cicadas had fallen quiet, replaced by crickets. *Maybe they're playing cricket sumo in town*, Maomao thought. It was a simple entertainment in which the bugs were made to fight each other. As with cockfighting, betting was common. At the moment, however, Maomao was in a room in a house on the outskirts of the capital, somewhat removed from the bustle at the heart of the city. She was looking at Yao, who was lying on a bed. This was her house.

"I'd really like to get back to work as soon as I can," Yao said, gazing outside. She was wearing nightclothes. It had been more than two weeks since the poisoning. She'd been in and out of consciousness for a while, but now she seemed to have recovered.

"I'm sure that would make En'en very happy," Maomao said. En'en was working at that moment—not for Jinshi anymore; she'd returned to the medical office. Maomao suspected, though, that she still wasn't focusing very well. She'd nominally been dismissed from Jinshi's service for failure to attend to her duties. She'd spent all her time at Yao's side instead, but Maomao gathered that Yao had finally chased her out.

"I really thought I could get along without her," Yao said, more to herself than to Maomao.

"I don't think anyone could have prevented what happened," Maomao said.

"Not even you, Maomao?"

She went quiet at that. She had a habit of putting any interesting-looking poisonous objects into her mouth, and yes, she'd experienced *Amanita virosa* before, although she'd thrown it up before it had been absorbed by her digestive tract. (Incidentally, she'd done the same after sampling the mushroom congee in the shrine maiden's chambers, duly putting a finger down her throat before she could digest what she'd eaten. She must not have gotten quite all of it, for she'd had a mild case of vomiting later.)

The old lady sure went nuts on me that time. The madam had been merciless, drawing on all her experience helping the courtesans with abortions. Maomao had thought she might cough up her own stomach. So

yes, she was familiar with the flavor and culinary qualities of mushrooms. She might even have noticed the poisonous fungus, if it hadn't been too finely chopped.

"I guess I really just don't know what I'm doing yet," Yao said, brushing aside her bangs. She'd lost a great deal of weight on account of the poison, but her chest was still plenty healthy.

Maomao passed her some of the medicinal tea her old man had given her. Now that Yao was out of the woods, she was being treated at her own home—but Maomao looked around that home with some surprise. It was a gorgeous house, true enough, but it felt lonely somehow. Even the servants who had come to greet her had seemed few in number considering the size of the mansion.

"I'm sorry I couldn't show you more hospitality," Yao said.

This was probably where Maomao was supposed to say something like "Oh, not at all," but she never had been good at social niceties.

"This used to be our second home," Yao went on. "But my uncle took the main house out from under us."

"I see," Maomao said. So that was why she was living somewhere so out of the way. Maomao had known Yao came from a good family, but now she thought she had some sense of why the young woman showed such ambition, such a desire to become a medical assistant.

"I tried to give En'en a push, but she came back. I don't think she can hope to get anywhere in the world serving me."

Yao's father was dead, and although she had an inheritance, her uncle was the successor to the headship of the family. In Li, it was expected that women would obey men. Now that he was head of the house, Yao's future lay in her uncle's hands. If he made a marriage match for her, she would be obliged to accept it.

Which explains why she's so eager to learn a trade. It was one way for the self-possessed young woman to resist her destiny.

"Such a shame En'en threw it away. I gather the Moon Prince was quite fond of her."

"Yes, so it seems."

Maomao thought she had at least some sense of what Jinshi had liked about En'en. He could be a distinctly strange person (not that she was one to talk), and he seemed more comfortable with people who had only exactly as much to do with him as necessary, rather than fawning or becoming overly involved. Maomao was a little worried about what Jinshi

might decide to do next, but she figured they were safe for a while.

"I was so sure En'en would do an excellent job no matter where she went," Yao said.

"One might say her true value only reveals itself when she's with you, Yao," Maomao replied. Indeed, sometimes it revealed itself a little too much. It could be scary. Especially when it came to Yao's chest—there was no denying that En'en had supplied all the necessary nutrients at every turn.

I definitely need a chart of what she's been feeding her, thought Maomao. She unconsciously began to flex her fingers.

"Yes... That was exactly why I wanted to give her a chance to get away. But I see now it's hopeless. Not just for me—if En'en really needs me that much, who am I to turn her down?"

Maomao suspected these sentimental turns were one of the things that drew En'en to Yao. She would quite enjoy discovering how En'en might react should Yao ever go to be someone's wife.

"Hopeless," Yao repeated fondly. Then she looked at Maomao. "And I think you've been doing some work that you haven't been telling us about."

"Whatever do you mean?" Maomao said. She did feel guilty trying to play dumb. True, Yao had survived her poisoning, but Maomao had specifically allowed the criminal who had done it to live. Meanwhile, publicly, Yao was believed to have failed as a food taster and to have been indirectly responsible for the death of a very important person, a stain on her reputation she would have to live with.

And she gets nothing out of it.

"They're treating me too well," Yao said. "I screwed up, I made a mess of everything, and still they're being decent to me, allowing me to continue to work. I'm not such a child as to think the world is that kind to people."

Maomao caught her breath.

"No, you don't have to say anything. Pretend I'm talking to myself. You can just sip your tea and stare off into the distance." She went on, the words coming easily. "I do believe those around me are kind enough not to simply dispose of me—but it also shows that they don't believe I'm on their level. I know it might not be wise to say that out loud, and maybe the fact that I am is just more proof that I still have a lot of growing up to do, but I need to get it off my chest. Yes... Even if I'm just saying it to

myself.”

In other words, she understood, even if only dimly, that the case had not ended in the way the public had been told. No doubt Yao wasn’t the only one who had her suspicions—but pretending nothing had happened was the smartest thing to do, and everyone was keeping their mouths shut.

“If En’en found out, though, I don’t know what she might do. I can accept it, but she might not listen to me. So I just hope you’ll be careful that she never learns the truth.” En’en might indeed question what had happened with the shrine maiden. If she ever discovered who the true perpetrator of the poisoning was, and that they were still alive, she might decide to take revenge in Yao’s place. “I would hate for En’en to do something rash, something that might stop her from finding a better place in the world. That’s all.”

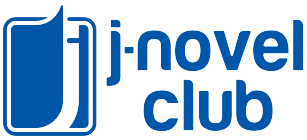
See? Sentimental.

Those above them had determined that this matter was closed, so in Maomao’s mind it was over. She wouldn’t want to stir the pot. “I’m afraid my ears aren’t very good, so I didn’t hear most of what you were saying. Yes?”

“My, it must be difficult to have such poor hearing,” Yao replied, a touch teasingly. She informed Maomao that she would return to her duties in a few days.

Maomao left the mansion. She had the day off, so there was no carriage waiting for her. The walk home was a bit of a long one, but she would make it. Children ran around, carrying little cages with bugs in them. The festival atmosphere had subsided, replaced by a comfortable laziness. For the townspeople, the death of the foreign shrine maiden was but a passing concern. The last energy of the festival would soon be overtaken once more by the rhythms of daily life.

Maomao took a sniff of the air. It was turning cold. She set off for home.



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